VIDEOGAME CULTURE

SEPTEMBER 200

EDGE

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PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3

THE NEXT GENERATION RACE STARTS HERE – ON XBOX 360

NEO-GEO ON PS

How the underground sce
transforming Sony's hand

VIRTUALLY RE

The incredible 3D engine
takes visuals to a new pla

POMPOM ON 3

The men behind Mutant S
and Space Tripper go next

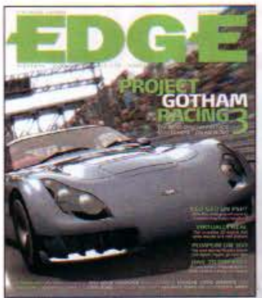
HAIL TO THE KI

Michel Ancel's interpretati
Peter Jackson's Kong: no do

PREVIEWED BURNOUT REVENGE **TEST DRIVE UNLIMITED** SOUL CALIBUR 3 **SPARTAN: TOTAL WARRIOR**

REVIEWED KATAMARI DAMACY 2 **CHIBI ROBO** WORLD OF WARCRAFT **ADVANCE WARS DS** GENJI **CODED A**





Here's an exercise for you. Take this magazine and place it, open and face down, on a flat surface in front of you (taking care not to open it too far, so that you don't damage its spine, naturally). Now, imagine that the **Edge** logo and all the other furniture isn't actually there at all. Done that? OK, you're now looking at a snapshot of Microsoft's 'High Definition Era' thanks to an in-game image of Xbox 360 title *Project Gotham Racing 3* presented in a 'widescreen' format that fairly accurately recreates the ratio of the horribly expensive new TV you've been eyeing (of course it's a lot smaller than that 56" LCD monster, but it gives you an idea). Looks all right, doesn't it? Pay particular attention to its slinky reflections. Not bad.

As all game developers have noticed, realtime imagery is catching up with prerendered content. To some, such as *PGR3* developer Bizarre Creations, this progression is the sort of thing that makes people turn up for work smiling in the mornings (not only because it means they no longer have to spend additional hours laboriously rendering up bespoke images for magazine covers – such content can simply be squirted out of the game engine). To others, it's more of a distraction – albeit a pleasant one. This month we speak to game creators working from both of these perspectives, from Relentless (see p72) and PomPom (p64) on one side to Avalanche (p56) and Bizarre (p42) on the other. Though their approaches are different – necessitated by their areas of expertise and/or interest – each has a story to tell that will be of interest to anyone who turns to consoles for entertainment, whatever its form.

And now, another exercise: visit our website, **Edge** Online (www.edge-online.com), to register your vote for the **Edge** Award at the Edinburgh Interactive Entertainment Festival (see p12) – and also to see how it might have changed since you last paid a visit. It's not yet in high-def widescreen, but we might look into that.



EDGE

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Inside front cover image © Corbis (RM)

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LE16 PEF
Email: games.subs@futurenet.co.uk
Distributed by Marketforce (UK) Ltd, 5th Floor, Low Rise Building, Kings Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London. 0207 633 3333.

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PRODUCTION OF EDGE
Hardware: Power Macintosh G4, G5
Software: Adobe InDesign, Adobe Photoshop, Macromedia FreeHand, Adobe Illustrator and Microsoft Office
Typography: (Adobe®) Frutiger Light, Regular, Bold, Black, Italic. Max (TF/LF) Light, Regular, Semi-Bold, Bold, Black, Italic. Simian (Display/Text) Orangutan, Chimpanzee, Gorilla. QType Book, Medium, Bold, Italic. Prensa Book, Bold, Italic. Bad Excuse, Bad Excuse Solid.

Printed in the UK by Southernprint, Poole, Dorset

Edge is brought to you by Future Publishing Ltd, the makers of PC Gamer, GamesMaster, PlayStation2 Official Magazine-UK, PlayStation World, NGC, PSM2.

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Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol: FUTR) www.futureplc.com

"Naturally you didn't know I was wearing my special Super B long thermal underwear"

ABC **28,791**
July-December 2004
(Audit Bureau of Circulation)

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START











ESports: the gateway to fortune and glory

As money pours into the gaming tournament circuit, is the time right for gifted players to begin contemplating careers as professional gamers?



Deep within Paris' famous Louvre museum, the Electronic Sports World Cup reaches its finale. In a one-sided encounter top American *Counter-Strike* team Complexity Syndicate conquer the previous champs, Denmark's SK-Gaming, to claim the top prize of $40,000. It is a prize they undoubtedly deserve. The dedicated five-man team, aged 18 to 21, spent the past month preparing for the finals with a gruelling six- to ten-hour-a-day practice routine, their obliteration of the world's top teams in the knockout phase testament to their determination.

The third annual ESWC ranks alongside the CPL (CyberAthelete Professional League) and the WCG (World Cyber Games) as one of the biggest events on the gaming calendar. This year's ESWC held preliminary qualifying competitions in 50 nations with 800 players qualifying for the grand finals. These 800 players earned themselves expenses-paid trips from around the globe to compete in the grand finals for a combined prize purse of $250,000.

The ESWC final marks a significant increase in the growth of eSports over the past few years. Two thousand paying French teenagers crammed into the theatre to watch the *CS* finals and catch a glimpse of their gaming legends in the flesh. Online, the viewing figures are even more impressive and continue to grow each year. Some 25,000 watched the ESWC final on HLTV (Half-Life TV – an online relay allowing spectators to watch the game from home); another 10,000 downloaded the replay of the final and then another 10,000 followed the game on VB Broadcast (a mixed streaming video commentary). Electronic sports is growing exponentially, and players with dedication and talent, like those in Complexity Syndicate, are among the first in line for some colossal payouts.

This year an increase in major international competitions and fierce jockeying for media attention among the established three has resulted in combined cash prizes exceeding $2.5m. Yet even this figure doesn't fully reveal the benefits of being best. It neglects to include the hundreds of national competitions, all the top-of-the-range hardware prizes and the value of expenses-paid trips won at nationals to compete in finals across the globe. The very top players can even double or triple their income through sponsorship from hardware companies eager to splatter their logos on the backs of gaming champions. Even then the top gamers can boost their earnings: over 50 top gamers presently offer gaming 'lessons' to pro-wannabes willing to fork out roughly $30 for a one-hour session.





The core of the scene revolves around events like the Acon championship, whose last global finals were held in Xi'an and offered a prize of $20,000 (£11,485) to its *Counter-Strike* winners

CPL president and founder **Angel Munoz** is regarded by many as the godfather of the modern eSports concept. A former New York investment banker, Munoz's passion for gaming competition quickly led to the formation of the CPL in 1997. Speaking of growth the growth within eSports over the past few years, he's quick to cite various facts and figures: "Our first event in 1997 had about 300 people registered, and this CPL Summer Event had almost 8,000 people register. So it is plainly obvious that the interest in eSports has grown hugely in the past eight years. For the 2006 summer event we expect 12,000 registrations."



The news that all-girl clan Les Seules has secured its own 12-week US reality TV show demonstrates that there is potential beyond prize money for earning a gaming living

Over the past eight years, his organisation has given away over $2m in 35 international events across five continents. As professional gaming has developed, other organisations have begun to muscle their way in: WCG launched its annual events in 2000, ESWC joined the fray in 2003, ACON in 2004, and WEG (World eSport Games) earlier this year. This year also saw the commencement of the $1m CPL World Tour, a global grand-prix-styled *Painkiller* competition with stops held in ten countries.

The South Korean gaming scene, far outside the influence of western FPS-based tournaments, has taken a rather different direction. The release of *StarCraft* in 1997 spawned a subculture of gamers





Professional gaming is an intensely international endevour, with this year's World Cyber Games, to be held in Singapore, attracting qualifying teams from over 70 different countries worldwide

regularly attending their local PC-Baang (internet café). Such was the popularity of the game and gaming in general that within two years the nation had two TV stations dedicated to covering the major competitions. Now with five dedicated TV stations covering even weekday league matches, talented *WarCraft* and *StarCraft* gamers can expect to rake in a yearly salary upwards of $50,000, with the top ten or so players earning somewhere in the region of $200,000. Yet even this figure can be doubled through sponsorship and advertisements: *StarCraft* champion Yo-Hwan Lim has an official fan club membership numbering 470,000, and is estimated to have earned somewhere in the region of $400,000 over the past year. The possibility of earning major dollars has even attracted several of Europe and North America's top strategists to move to the country in order to compete in televised leagues and tournaments.

Wanting to become a professional gamer is still a dangerous (and parentally unpopular) ambition. Top players are often forced to socially withdraw from their peers and skip a raft of educational commitments (including exams) in favour of attending top gaming tournaments. Vast sums of money must also be invested to keep up with the latest computer gaming upgrades. Today's eSports pros must also be able to adapt quickly to new titles, as being the best in one game discipline is no longer enough. As games continue to change on the whims of organisers or sponsors, top players must be able to continuously motivate themselves through hours upon hours of practice. This is one aspect which may hold eSports back in the near future – until universal standards are agreed, it's hard for professional gamers to be able to rely on the circuit for a dependable income.







The range of games at most events is still small, with old faves like *Counter-Strike* (top) and *WarCraft III* (right) taking centre stage. Newcomers such as *Painkiller* (above) are becoming more recognised, particularly with strong support from their publishers

Including the 200 members registered with the Korean Pro-Gamers Association (only half of whom earn sufficient money to live off) there are in the region of 250 professional gamers worldwide. That said, it's not the case that all major tournaments outside of South East Asia are won by the same 50 gamers: quite often non-professional gamers will win a major event but still find it unfeasible to step up from amateur gamer to pro. Opportunities for newcomers to prove themselves are few and are highly competitive, since before signing minimum wage (often only expenses-paid contracts), the player will usually be required to win at least two major competitions. No easy feat given that the attendance of these tournaments is usually in the region of 500 to 1,000 of the world's best gamers.

Including the members registered with the Korean Pro-Gamers Association (only half of whom earn sufficient money to live off) there are in the region of 250 pro gamers worldwide



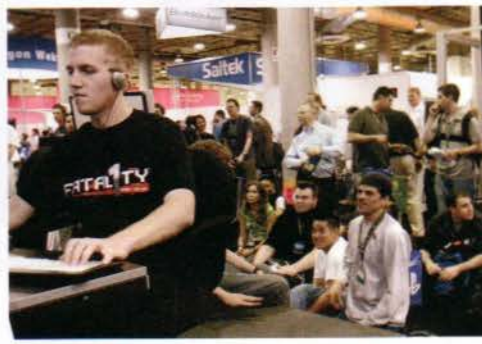
Events like the vast Norwegian get-together The Gathering, which has been growing steadily over the last 13 years, give an indication of how large – and how loyal – the existing fanbase is

Females have it even tougher. Only ESWC holds an annual female *Counter-Strike* tournament, and even the need for this is questioned. It's a fair point considering there are no rules preventing women competing in the main *CS* tournament. **Anne Rogers**, a member of the UK women's team at the 2004 ESWC, explains: "It's appropriate because the level of competition in the female scene is so much lower, in general, than the other top teams. At this point, the separate competitions are needed to enable the female scene to grow and of course in turn raise the profile of competitive gaming as a whole." One girl-gaming team is about to see its profile rise





Events like the ESWC are pushing for the inclusion of console games like *Pro Evolution Soccer*, in the hope of widening the demographic of both players and the crucial, ticket-buying audience. Other console games, such as *Halo 2* and *Dead Or Alive Ultimate*, are also beginning to make their mark, becoming recognised at major competitions such as the World Cyber Games



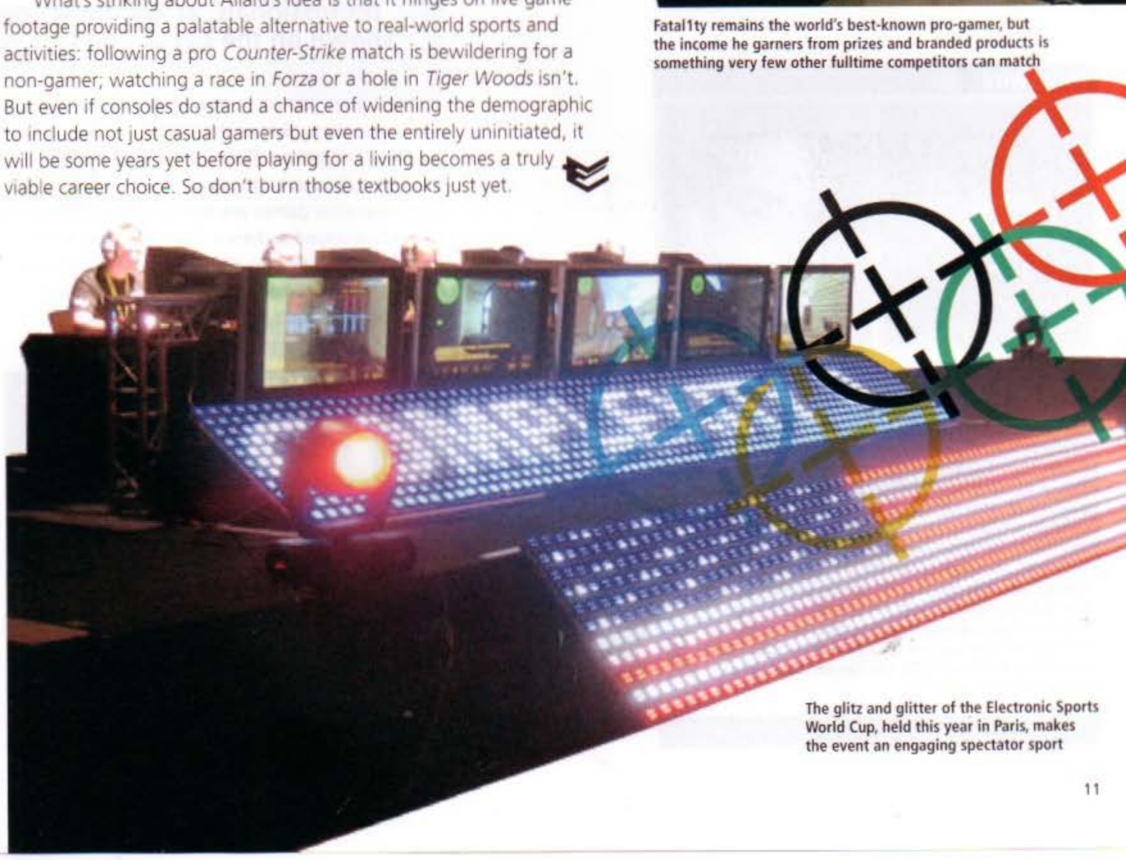
Fatal1ty remains the world's best-known pro-gamer, but the income he garners from prizes and branded products is something very few other fulltime competitors can match

considerably. Les Seules, a mixed Danish/Swedish female *Counter-Strike* clan, has been signed by a Hollywood TV company to appear in an American reality TV show called Play US. The show will follow the women on a 12-week gaming tour of the country (see www.playus.tv for details).

Ultimately, however, the future growth of eSports balances not upon accommodating female gamers but in becoming a mainstream entertainment platform. If professional gaming is ever to rival major sports, it needs far greater exposure from the mainstream media. It needs to prove that the rules of competitions and the skills required to compete at the highest echelons of gaming can be appreciated by even the most casual gamer. A template has already been created by South Korea where gaming is regarded as the nation's third most popular sport. However, gaming in South Korea has had the advantage of government support: it is difficult to imagine Tony Blair or Tessa Jowell urging children to sacrifice their education in favour of playing computer games all day.

The solution, or at least a significant boost, may come from the console sector. Microsoft's J Allard is particularly passionate about Xbox 360's potential to produce a generation of pro-gamers – people who will have their 360 webcams trained on them while people all over the world watch them play. In his vision of eSport's future, he sees them being interviewed by professional commentators after matches and becoming gaming celebrities – for Xbox Live to effectively become a new TV channel. With such mass popularity behind the console market, this could well be the year that eSports is propelled into the limelight.

What's striking about Allard's idea is that it hinges on live game footage providing a palatable alternative to real-world sports and activities: following a pro *Counter-Strike* match is bewildering for a non-gamer; watching a race in *Forza* or a hole in *Tiger Woods* isn't. But even if consoles do stand a chance of widening the demographic to include not just casual gamers but even the entirely uninitiated, it will be some years yet before playing for a living becomes a truly viable career choice. So don't burn those textbooks just yet.



The glitz and glitter of the Electronic Sports World Cup, held this year in Paris, makes the event an engaging spectator sport

EVENT

Now games march north

Edinburgh is host again, this time for the annual UK electronic entertainment expo



Last year, only a few game pods were integrated into the main conference; this year, attendees can move from screenings and conference sessions straight to hands-on play

Running from August 10 to 14, the third Edinburgh games festival intends to be the most focused and successful yet, bringing together industry delegates, gaming consumers and curious outsiders to discuss and observe the future of videogaming. It comes in three parts – a two-day conference surrounded by a series of game screenings and playable demos. The first day of the conference itself is geared toward integrating gaming with the wider cultural concerns of Edinburgh at festival time, focusing on how gaming is coming to dominate people's use of television and looking at how massively multiplayer games are breaking new social and commercial ground. Day two is concerned with the creative side of game-making, examining the challenges of storytelling within games, questioning why it's so hard to make game characters which penetrate the mainstream consciousness, and asking why games aren't funnier.

However, a crucial aspect of Edinburgh is the access it gives gamers to new titles and the people who make them. Rather than showing new games on a deafening show floor packed with industry professionals who know about them all already, at Edinburgh new games are shown on the big screen to a widely mixed audience. This year, premieres include *EyeToy: Kinetic*, Kuju's *Battalion Wars* and Lionhead's *The Movies*, as well as David Braben presenting Frontier's *Wallace & Gromit And The Curse Of The Were-Rabbit* and Marko Hein showing off the latest footage of *The Legend Of Zelda: Twilight Princess*. Behind-the-scenes presentations include talks from the makers of *24: The Game* and *Darwinia*. Tickets are £3 for each screening, and are available via the EIEF website.

Rather than showing new games on a deafening show floor packed with industry professionals, at Edinburgh new games are shown on the big screen to a wide audience



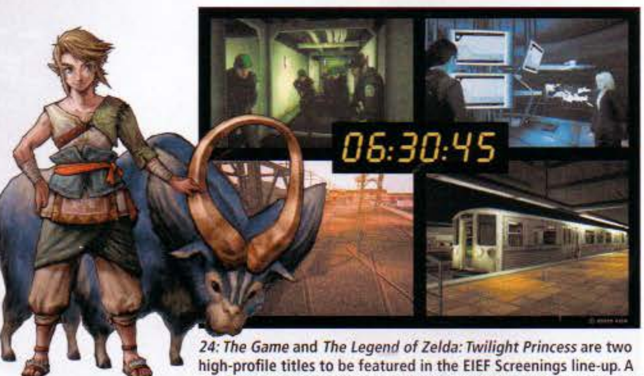
Although the Edinburgh International Conference Centre has good facilities, it is on the periphery of the city's core festival territory. Time will tell if the venue can draw enough punters

In another sign that the event is gaining credibility, Nintendo is also bringing a playable version of *Twilight Princess* – the first in the UK – to the Go Play Games section of the festival, which will also include *SingStar: Popworld* and Sony's great white Christmas hope, *Buzz!* (see p72). Sujoy Roy, still the UK's best known pro-gamer, will be on hand to give expert lessons to those looking to steal his crown. Tickets for Go Play Games are also £3 for each two-hour session, via the EIEF website.

This year, all three events are centralised in the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, meaning that delegates will be able to mix with their public in a way that's still all too rare in the games industry.

Ultimately, it's a surprising state of affairs. At a time when gaming's creative significance is still widely dismissed by the general public, and when the industry is used to relying on its balance sheets to back up its claims for significance, it's a festival celebrating the cultural impact of games which has become a regular feature of the UK's gaming summer calendar. The EIEF still has some way to go before it can stand side by side with the other Edinburgh festivals, but it remains an event with enormous promise.

Details of all sessions and tickets are available online (www.eief.co.uk).



24: The Game and *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess* are two high-profile titles to be featured in the EIEF Screenings line-up. A playable version of *Zelda* will also be available at Go Play Games

Newswire





Two for Sorrows

Designers John Romero (above left) and Josh Sawyer (above right) have departed from Midway's San Diego studio, with development of their project *Gauntlet: Seven Sorrows* incomplete – but, according to Midway, 'not impacted' by their departure, and still on schedule for its winter launch. While it's an uncomfortable footnote to *Seven Sorrows*' development, there's hope that the team can remain motivated after the loss of their design leads to ensure the game, and by degrees the *Gauntlet* name, will survive. Romero's post-Midway plans are currently unknown, whereas Sawyer will be joining RPG developer Obsidian, reuniting with many of his former Black Isle Studios co-workers.



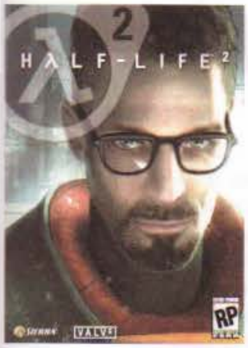


The Edge Award at EIEF

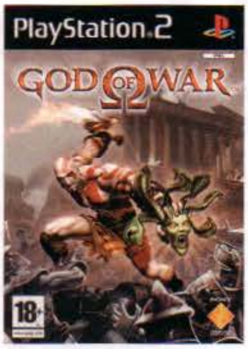
After the success of Metroid Prime and Made In Wario, who can woo the judges for the third Edinburgh prize?

A key part of the EIEF is the **Edge** Award. Rather than rewarding commercial success, the **Edge** Award looks at games released in the last year and picks out those which have done the most to reshape our expectations of what games are capable of. Sometimes it's a case of breaking entirely new ground, sometimes of taking established game designs and taking them to new heights of excellence. Sometimes it's both. This shortlist of ten games is then submitted to a jury formed of people within the videogame industry whose professional involvement in games hasn't diminished their personal passion for playing them. The jury this year consists of Funcom's Ragnar Tornquist, Big Blue Box's Dene Carter, John Baez from The Behemoth, Josh Randall from Harmonix, and Randy Smith, formerly of Ion Storm. The games they'll be considering this year are shown below.

However, their say isn't final. Alongside the jurors' award runs the People's Choice Award, which is drawn from the same shortlist, but voted for by **Edge** readers and EIEF attendees. Go to www.edge-online.com to cast your vote for the game you think best deserves recognition.



Half-Life 2
Vivendi
Valve



God Of War
SCEA
In-house (Santa Monica)



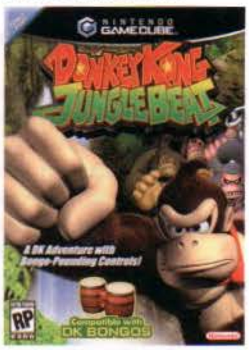
Darwinia
Introversion
In-house



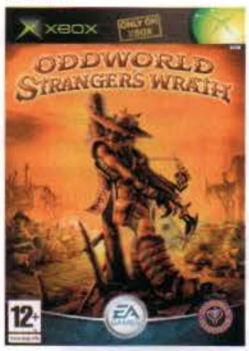
Daigasso! Band Brothers
Nintendo
In-house



Yoshi's Touch & Go
Nintendo
In-house



Donkey Kong: Jungle Beat
Nintendo
In-house



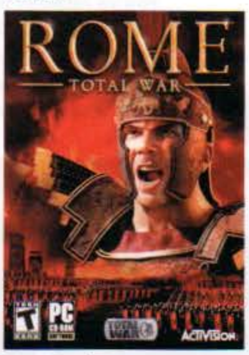
Oddworld: Stranger's Wrath
EA
Oddworld Inhabitants



Resident Evil 4
Capcom
In-house (Prod Studio 4)



Lego Star Wars
Giant
Traveller's Tales



Rome: Total War
Activision
The Creative Assembly



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

People will argue, but few will ultimately maintain that the acronym 'ROM' tallies wholly with the notion of legitimacy. For every *Beneath A Steel Sky* and *Another World* (both benevolently declared freeware by their copyright holders) there are hundreds, if not thousands, of emulated games that, though largely worthless as a massmarket commodity, at best inhabit a dark grey region of the law. PDRoms, however, provides an imposing library of legal homebrew that, contrary to expectations, includes many a notable effort. Conveniently arranged and vetted according to a site submission policy, there's enough here to provide at least a distraction for those keen to test the emulation capabilities of, say, their PSP without risk of an inadvertent copyright faux pas.

Site: PD ROMS
URL: www.pdroms.de



OUT THERE



P-BLOCK ROCKIN' BEATS

Game music cover bands have by and large all fallen into the same category – straightforward blazing metal renditions of 8bit hits – which is what makes SMW so startlingly good. XOC's album of *Super Mario World* themes, played entirely solo, bucks that trend and plays fast and loose with the synthesised originals, reinterpreting but managing to faithfully maintain all of their lighthearted energy with a variety of live instrumentation. From the backbeat sock-hop theme song, to the lazy bossanova of Star Road, to the appropriately pure-prog medley of Castle and Bowser themes, every track is a pop gem and testament both to the lasting appeal of Kondo's compositions and to XOC's one-man-band prowess.

Download the entire album for your own listening pleasure from www.archive.org/details/xoc_SMW







INTERVIEW

Taking 360 for a spin

Eden Games' Stephane Baudet on bringing an old American brand to a new American system

The resumé of **Stephane Baudet** (above) dates back to cherished 16bit Infogrames titles such as *North & South* and *Hostages*. His current studio, Eden, made its name on PS1 and PS2 with the *V-Rally* series, before attempting action-adventure with *Kya: Dark Lineage*. Now 100-strong, Baudet and company are back on the road with 360 title *Test Drive Unlimited* (previewed on page 30). We asked him how he's getting on.

How have you taken the jump from PS2 development to 360?

When you're at the end of one generation, you're focused on game content and design: you already know what works and what doesn't with the hardware. Moving to the next generation, where you have no benchmarks, is very exciting – working with the technical guys to discover what features they can present you with. But it's also difficult, because you can come up with some ideas and they'll say: 'There's no way we can do it', leaving you to wonder if it's true, or if they haven't dug hard enough. You need to keep an eye on what everyone else is doing, to make sure that you're in line with the rest and don't disappoint.

What's communication like between Xbox 360 developers?

We share the same developer support, so we see the other developers' questions and the answers – sometimes we ask questions and another developer can even respond directly. Sometimes, it's a matter of looking at what's been posted on the forums and seeing who has the same issues, to know that we just need to wait for an answer – although it can be frightening when you see a question that affects you, and nobody has answered for four weeks! Then you know it's a *real* issue [laughs].

You've recently received beta kits – were there any surprises with their make-up?

We had evaluations of the differences between the alpha and beta kits before we actually received them, and it turns out that when we tried to run







Test Drive's 16bit realisation of a full detail in-car view seems quaint now, but *Unlimited* aims to recapture its functionality, with player-usable radio, wipers, windows and speed-trap detector





Competition in the area of vehicle rendering will be fierce, not least from Microsoft's own flagship *PGR3*, but Baudet is confident his dedicated modelling team's work on bringing each vehicle to life – with customisable interior finishes, of course – will be one of *Unlimited*'s standout features. The amount of illusory detail brought out by pixel shaders confirms their importance to next-gen visual techniques





the code, we couldn't make the performances match. It's a bit more work than we expected, but we'll figure out how to make the best use of it.

Unlimited seems to share many of J Allard's visions of an always-online community. Did Microsoft play a role in defining the concept?
Microsoft did communicate that to us as the initial pitch for the platform, and Allard I think is also gathering all the ideas, collectively, from all the 360 developers. I was surprised to see him talking about streaming radio, because the only thing we heard from Microsoft is: 'That's going to be very difficult, you're crazy guys to try to do it'. And then I saw him talking about realtime broadcast radio, and I thought: 'Aha! That comes from us'. But it's his job to look at what the development community is doing, and to try to put those features at the front of the 360.

Are those features what drew you to develop for the 360 instead of Sony's machine?
The way I saw next-gen when moving from this generation was that online would be one of the key elements, and to be honest, Microsoft are a lot more advanced than Sony, especially on the software side. So it made sense for us to start working on 360 rather than waiting for PS3 – I'm not saying we won't do it, but I saw it as a good opportunity to learn a lot from Microsoft about the online aspect. We have yet to see the final PS3 hardware, and figure out how different it is and how to work with it, what would be suitable for it.

How are you approaching taking the _Test Drive_ brand into a new generation?
I think American gamers are more focused on the content – and the content of the last *Test Drive* game was... OK – whereas in Europe we tend to focus on quality, which accounts for the different perceptions. But the brand has become diluted over the years, after the split between *Test Drive* and *Need For Speed* – actually, the executive producer of *NFS* was one of the key people behind *Test Drive*. So I'm very happy to go back to its roots, and use the next generation as an opportunity to wipe out the negative aspects. There's going to be a lot of competition with EA, but I think it's healthy competition, because *NFS* needs strong contenders. We don't want to produce a me-too product, as we can't be so pretentious as to think we can be better than them – I like the *Underground* series, but I'd like to create something different. I don't like the idea of doing a *Juiced*, or even *Midnight Club*... well, I can't blame the *Midnight Club* team, as they broke the idea of street racing, but to me they're all too similar, and I think there's only room for one product. The others should do something different.

Are you disappointed that many of the next-gen titles seem 'me-too'?
What we saw at E3 was at very early stages: it wasn't easy for developers to show games on alpha kits, as they weren't going to be up to the standards expected for next-generation games. It was a very hard decision for Microsoft, and the result of that was that few games were shown and they weren't perhaps the best. A lot of people were disappointed by the E3 showings, but I think from September to December we'll start to see more interesting 360 games, and probably the early stages of games on PS3. The announcements were maybe a bit too soon to show high-quality games. Basically, the hardware is finished almost when it ships – a bit like its games in that respect. Even a month before shipping you can improve the quality so much with tweaking, and I guess it's the same with the hardware.

This will be Eden's third console generation – what have your experiences been like with each one?
If you get a good first step into a generation, it makes your life easier during it, and that's one of the reasons I tried to get on to a next-generation platform as soon as I could. With the PlayStation, we were lucky that the competition was less tough – there were barely any racing games, let alone rally games, when we made *V-Rally*. But when we moved onto PlayStation 2 we'd lost six months, and we had difficulty catching up: *Kya* was a good game, but it failed because we were too late. The competition was very strong, and we were perhaps arrogant to think our game could compete when we had had no experience in the genre before.

I'm more confident with *Test Drive* because we have more experience, and we need that – we can't afford to improvise on 360 as we're not competing with other small French developers, we're competing with the best guys in the world. We don't necessarily have to beat them all [laughs]. We just need a reasonable success, and then we try to do the next one better.



SOUND BYTES

"Doug Lowenstein travels with his own private make-up artist. Did you all know that?"
Jack Thompson writes an open – and apparently irony-free – letter to the ESA castigating its president for launching 'ad hominen jihads' on his opponents

"She did get a home version of *Frogger* to practice with, but more importantly walked away with a story of how the first time she played a videogame it was on stage at the Hollywood Bowl, accompanied by an orchestra."
A first-time gamer's baptism by volcano during an audience-participation competition at the Video Games Live orchestral event is blogged by Flagship's **Bill Roper**

"im not aloud to tell everything about it but WOW theres soo much crap on the xbox and some of it is sooO miscelanius. theres xbox arcade were u can Dl like arcade games and crap and u can stream music from ur PC to ur xbox and tons and tons and tons of other crap. I just thought id post about it"
Gamespot forumite **Elmojesus**, eloquent stepson of an Xbox 360 hardware tester, attempts to redefine the word 'confidentiality'. Although we dread to think how he'd spell it

"fixed: remove voice 'A-a-a' when passer-by's are running away from player; fixed: jaguar floats across screen at treetop level; fixed: npc die on contact with grenades, and not from the actual explosion; fixed: the size of the moon; fixed: the police station in Puerto Sombra could be destroyed with a single crossbow bolt"
A selection of notes accompanying *Boiling Point*'s ambitious patches

EVENT

Gaming and the big screen

Exploring the boundaries between games and films was the target of the first Non Trivial Interaction



For an event about the blurry line between games and film, the location of Non Trivial Interaction (also known as NTI*) at the National Film Theatre in July was clearly appropriate. The industries are experiencing a growing closeness, not least in terms of sharing graphical effects, cinematographic style and staff. Valve's **Bill Van Buren**, for example, revealed that one of the most recent recruits to the company behind *Half-Life 2* was Bay Raitt, the animation lead for the Gollum CG character in the Lord Of The Rings movies.

But it's not all plain sailing. Many of the speakers stressed the areas of separation between the two moving image-based cultures as well. The imbalance of the business relationship between them was certainly explicit in the subtitle of Treyarch's **Jamie Fristrom**'s talk: 'How I learned to stop worrying and love being Hollywood's bitch'. As the technical director of the *Spider-Man 2* game explained, this referred to the now-infamous quote of one-time Xbox evangelist Seamus Blackley that if developers didn't create their own characters and stories but just relied on film licences, the industry would find itself in thrall to movie studios.

"Ripping off movies is the tool, not the goal. The goal is drama and there is plenty of drama that hasn't been mined by movies"

As Fristrom pointed out, however, as game graphics have become more realistic there's been a move for games to build on the visual style of films. The Omaha beach sequence from *Medal Of Honor* or the John Woo-ness of *Max Payne* were part of what made those games successful, but only part.

"Ripping off movies is the tool we use, but it's not the goal," he emphasised. "The goal is drama and there is plenty of drama to be created that hasn't been mined by movies."

Yet if it was anything, NTI* was a celebration of how far gaming has progressed in recent years. As **Peter Molyneux** stressed as he



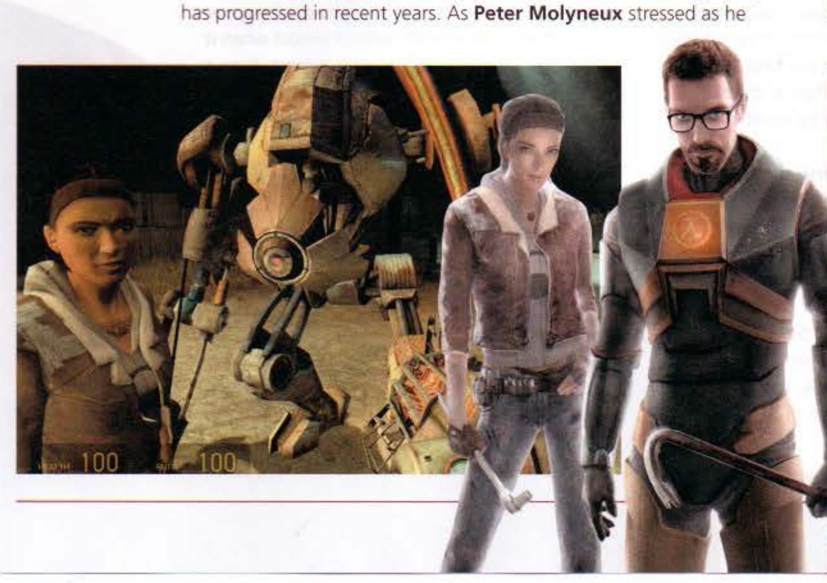
The bricks are strong in this one

How Lego and Star Wars were brought together

If any proof of that games, films and other licences can be combined in a synergetic manne[r] you only need to look as far as *Lego Star Wars*. As creative director Jonathan Smith explained, it was the universal appeal of Star Wars and the playfulness of Lego, as well as th[e] quality of the game itself, that has driven the project's success.

"We had to convince Lucas that Lego would be able to add play to the Star Wars experience[,]" he explained. "This was not goin[g] to be the game of the movies, bu[t] rather a game that lets you play within the movies. Lego gave both the developer and player permission to play."

And it was this sort of freedom that meant the game could enable players to do seemingly nonsensical things suc[h] as swap characters at any time o[r] play through Episode III as Darth Maul with buddy Yoda.









Technical director of the *Spider-Man 2* game Jamie Fristrom explains how he's learned to love being Hollywood's bitch (far left). Academic James Newman picks over the making of seminal Bond game *GoldenEye* with original developer David Doak (left)



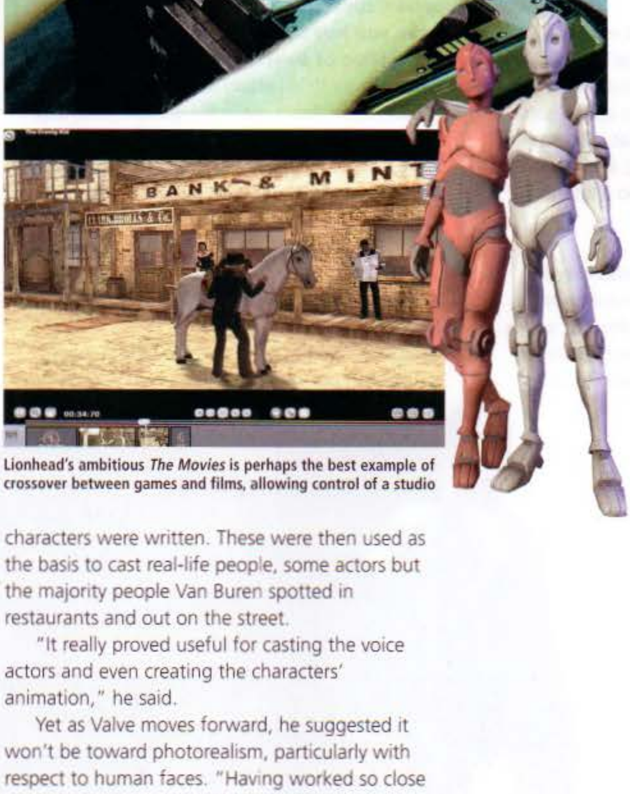


Eidos' creative director Ian Livingstone heads up the panel talk on the interchange between movie and game licences (above). As well as talking there was plenty to play with at NTI*, with one of Sega's *Star Wars* arcade cabinets (right) among the attractions

entranced another audience with demonstrations of *The Movies* and *Black & White 2*, gaming is the only entertainment medium where the action revolves around the player. "This is the unique selling point of games. We can give you a world that's a reflection of your character," he promised.

While this representation of self in the game world has been a longterm Molyneux theme – "The conflict in you as the player is the real interest for me," he said – a game such as *The Movies* sees a subtle change of emphasis. As well as the typical sim-style gameplay of building up a Hollywood studio through the silent, black-and-white and colour eras, it also provides players with the ability to make their own movie clips. This feature will be backed up with a website for people to upload their work. Sponsored by the Hollywood Reporter, there will be a monthly competition for the best, with top Hollywood talent promised as judges.

Perhaps the highlight of NTI* was the closing presentation from Valve's Van Buren. With *Half-Life 2* the best example to date of a game that builds on the cinematic while pushing the boundaries of gamic, he revealed the some of the deep processes behind its development. Before any artwork was carried out, profiles of all the



Lionhead's ambitious *The Movies* is perhaps the best example of crossover between games and films, allowing control of a studio

characters were written. These were then used as the basis to cast real-life people, some actors but the majority people Van Buren spotted in restaurants and out on the street.

"It really proved useful for casting the voice actors and even creating the characters' animation," he said.

Yet as Valve moves forward, he suggested it won't be toward photorealism, particularly with respect to human faces. "Having worked so close to photorealism in *Half-Life 2*, my inclination would be to take step back and become more stylised," he explained.

And that will be the biggest challenge as developers decide how to use the increased capability of new consoles. As games get closer to the fidelity of film, the hope has to be that the lessons of animated films such as Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within will inspire more experimentation in visual style and less apeing – because no one wants to be Hollywood's ape.



Valve's Bill Van Buren demonstrates the tools and techniques behind bringing the characters of *Half-Life 2* to life

START



EVENT

Console chiefs eye same goal

An unusual case of jaw-jaw not console war at ELSPA's Summit

So soon after E3, it was the close proximity of Sony's David Reeves (above) and Microsoft's Peter Moore that drew most attention at the ELSPA International Games Summit in July. Drawing on his previous experience at Sega, Moore argued this time around that the Xbox brand was strong enough to transform the so-called first-mover disadvantage into a positive. Indeed, Microsoft plans to ship ten million Xbox 360s within 16 months of launch. From Sony's point of view, Reeves preferred to deal with the issues of launching PSP in over 100 PAL territories. What was more significant, however, was how both executives talked up their goal to grow the overall console gaming market. "We can't keep recycling consumers between Sony and Microsoft," Reeves commented, adding that to this extent the companies would have to become partners in order to double the size of the market.

Elsewhere, the variety of topics covered demonstrated just how wide the concept of gaming has become. From an overview of an emerging model of in-game advertising provided by Nicolas Perkin from Massive Inc to the impact of hundreds of millions of Chinese gamers and the push to get games into UK education, it's clear the industry is now much than a group of young men sitting round their TVs.

In this context it was also good to see the industry continuing to improve public accountability, with the release of ongoing research suggesting many parents take an escapist view when it comes to videogaming's rating system. In contrast, for children the 18 rating works as more as a marketing tool than a warning sign.



Sony's Ray Maguire, Nintendo's David Yarnton and Rod Cousens of Codemasters chew things over at ELSPA's meet

INTERVIEW

Capcom's Ace in the hole

How do you woo the west, or convince players to pay £50 for a next-gen game? Capcom's Tatsuya Minami picks his way through the modern minefield



Caught between an expanding overseas market and a contracting domestic one – as well as between generations of home hardware and diversifying visions of portable gaming – mainstream Japanese development is currently facing some tough questions. With a forthcoming portfolio stretching from cartoon courtroom drama *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* to *Beat Down: Fists Of Vengeance*'s gritty brand of street justice (see p37), producer **Tatsuya Minami** (right) is casting Capcom's net wide for answers.

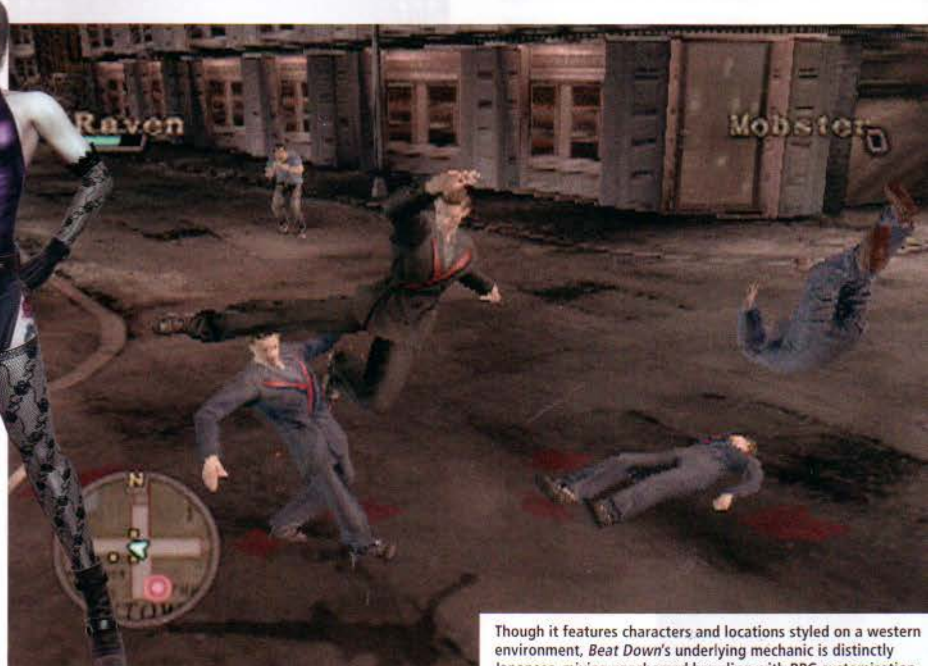
What is it about *Beat Down* that makes it different from other beat 'em ups?
Basically, the big difference will be that this is not a straightforward action game. It is an action game, but there are lots of other things that you can do. There is a kind of RPG element to it, and you can change the costumes around and do a lot more than just the combat action.

Do you think this kind of customisation is important in games today? It seems to be increasingly popular in lots of different styles.
We don't think that the kind of customisation where you can do anything you want would be popular with everybody. But for example, changing costumes in this game, there is a reason for it; either you are going to get away from your enemy by disguising yourself, or vice versa if you wanted to use that aspect to be found by the enemy, or whatever. If you have that sort of reason behind it, customisation is worthwhile.

With the Japanese market in decline, there's a move from Japanese game companies, including Capcom, to make more titles that appeal specifically to a western audience. Have you had this in mind during the production of *Beat Down*?
We didn't try to especially appeal to a western audience, we didn't make the game in that way. However, the stage is set in a hypothetical western town, so this is a kind of western game made by Japanese. Some western players think that this is quite interesting, some that it is completely wrong. It's a western game in the Japanese mind.

How do you think western tastes differ from Japanese tastes?
Obviously I didn't grow up in the US or Europe, so I haven't got any idea what would appeal to the western audience. Taking for example the action-adventure genre, I noticed that American players don't like any hints as such, whereas sometimes when I'm playing action-adventures I don't know what to do or where to go whatsoever, and if I make that type of game in Japan, Japanese players would really complain. We like hints and tips; give us a bit of guidance on what to do, where to go. *Tomb Raider*, that's British-made, it was really difficult for me to play.



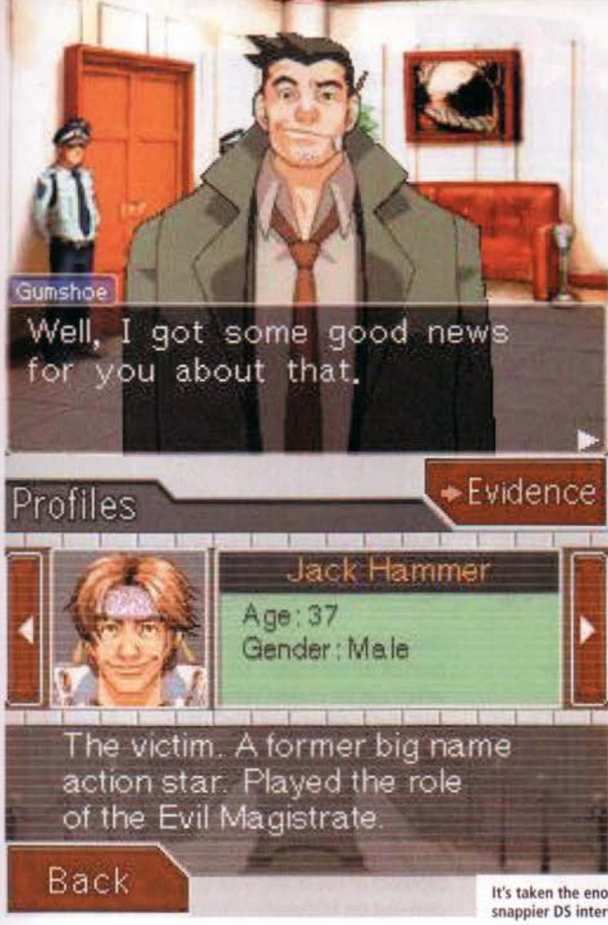


Though it features characters and locations styled on a western environment, *Beat Down*'s underlying mechanic is distinctly Japanese, mixing unashamed brawling with RPG customisation

Newswire

Valve EAses pressure?

Within weeks of its long-anticipated and bitter split from Vivendi Universal, Valve has found a suitably capable alternative outlet for its products in the form of EA's Partners program. The new publisher's first handled properties look set to be the *Half-Life 2* GOTY edition and the Xbox version of that title. Profitable as it'll surely be, the deal gives more indication regarding the future of Valve's business intentions and retail strategy than was previously apparent following its decision to instigate legal action against Vivendi. It seems unlikely that EA will readily accept the template for the developer's wares – established by *Half-Life 2*, whose scant packaging was suggestive of its Steam-oriented philosophy – with substantial future updates such as *HL2: Aftermath* remaining scheduled solely for online distribution.







It's taken the enormously popular *Gyakuten Saiban* series a long time to reach western shores, but with a snappier DS interface and fresh localisation, *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* is unlikely to face much objection

Capcom is bringing its historical Japanese title *Sengoku Basara* to the US, but calling it *Devil Kings* and making substantial changes to the characters and the setting – do you think there's a need to change the content as well as the difficulty for different regional tastes?
Traditionally, whichever Japanese game publisher publishes historical content, they've never sold many copies in the western market, and that's the truth. At Capcom we are not sure whether we really should alter it for the western audience or not. I'm not producing that particular game, but Mr Kobayashi [Hiroyuki Kobayashi, *Devil Kings*' producer] went through loads of discussion and personal torment and everything, and just this once he's chosen to change the name and adapt it to make it easier for a western audience to understand. But we don't know if it's the right or the wrong way to approach it.

"This year, everyone's talking about next-generation consoles, and we're a little bit concerned as to who's going to actually push titles on portable platforms"

You're overseeing *Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney* on Nintendo's DS. What was behind the decision to bring the *Gyakuten Saiban* courtroom adventures to western markets for the first time?
First of all, Capcom thought it was quite difficult to make that kind of adventure game appeal to a western audience, so that was the reason we withheld it. And also the Japanese judicial systems are different from western judicial systems, so we thought it would be pretty impossible for western players to understand. Having said that, the game content itself was high quality and interesting, and we thought that in itself it would probably appeal.

What was your reaction to E3 this year?
The first thing that surprised me was that there were no announcements for DS or PSP. At last year's E3 there were lots of announcements on portable hardware; lots of publishers came up with lots of titles for portable platforms. This time around at E3 everyone's talking about next-generation consoles, and we're a little bit concerned as to who's going to actually push titles on portable platforms. My second impression was that Microsoft performed quite well. They are very well prepared going towards launch, compared to the others.

Are you concerned about the amount of time and money it will take to make games for next-generation machines?
Yes, very concerned! At the moment the software will have to be sold for £50 or $100 otherwise we can't really cover our development costs. But obviously no one's going to buy games at that price. We have to think from a marketing point of view to start with, if we're going to sell to particular people with that sort of premium price, or what we're going to do about it.

But are you excited about the possibilities of the technology.
If the company pays us, then yes, there are loads of things we can do!

OUT THERE



DO THE MONKEY

More point'n'ham than point'n'click, the Hammond Highschool of Columbia's adaptation of *The Secret Of Monkey Island* is enjoying a global second run courtesy of fan website World Of Monkey Island. Like a gaming manifestation of Rushmore's Max Fischer, high school senior Chris Heady, 18, adopted Ron Gilbert's comic opus as a worthy addition to his portfolio as a director of the assembly hall stage. While the wavering performances of his cast/classmates predictably pale next to his own animated turn as Le Chuck, Heady's real achievement lies in the very existence of an amateur play officially authorised by LucasArts. The terms of its contract, he reveals, were that copies of the production would not be resold, and that it would be staged within a year. Videos, accordingly, are now freely available.



● www.worldofmi.com





Sega brings 360 to the arcades

House Of The Dead 4 marks the arcade giant's move to Microsoft's hardware for future coin-op releases

The coin-op's widescreen display is immediately attractive, but Sega is revamping its guns, which are a tad tough on the fingers

Sega's summer Private Show in Tokyo on July 8 saw the company reveal the hardware that will power all of its upcoming arcade games. The new board, entitled Lindbergh, is based on Microsoft's Xbox 360 hardware, and the first coin-op to use it, *House Of The Dead 4*, takes obvious advantage of its graphical capacity, outputting its action to an attention-grabbing 62" widescreen display.

Lindbergh's debut was confirmation of Sega's decision to discontinue manufacture of its popular and inexpensive Naomi arcade technology, although, aware of the need to support those developers still working with the board, the company made space at its show to present Naomi-powered games such as nifty vertical shooter *Under Defeat* from G.rev (see **E**151).

Sega also confirmed that it has a stack of further Lindbergh-powered games in development, including new iterations of *Virtua Fighter* and *Afterburner*, plus more titles using original IP.

As for *House Of The Dead 4*, aside from its visual impact, the biggest innovation came in the form of its controllers: Uzi-style machine guns which can be shaken vertically in order to reload and also in other directions to shake off zombies that have taken hold of your character (of which one is male, the other female).

No doubt the Lindbergh technology will be revamped in coordination with the release of further iterations of Xbox 360 devkits, and the prospect of eventually seeing Sega's next coin-ops on Microsoft's console is assured.

Continue

Edge Online
You have been visiting the site recently, yes?

Lindbergh
Read the story up there for why it's A Good Thing

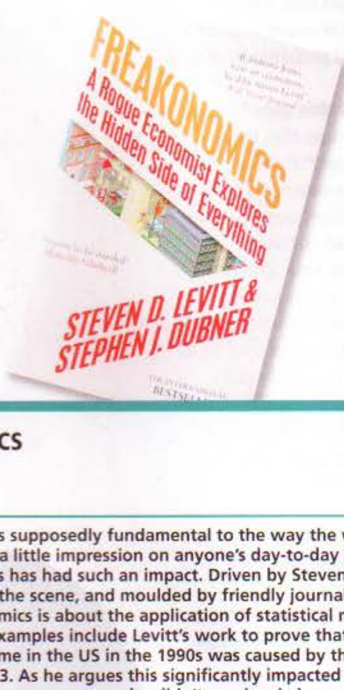
Gaming's popularity
Finally, everyone gets it. You knew they would

Quit

Gaming's popularity
Finally, everyone gets it. You feared they would

Game reviews
Everywhere. Getting worse. Unbelievably

Gaming in the dock
It isn't the first time. It won't be the last

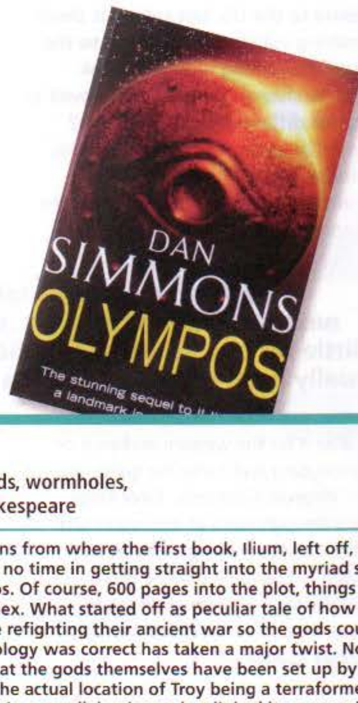


Author: Steven Levitt & Stephen Dubner
Publisher: Allen Lane
ISBN: 0 713 99806 7

FREAKONOMICS

Why economics rules the world

For a subject that's supposedly fundamental to the way the world works, economics makes a little impression on anyone's day-to-day life. Which is why Freakonomics has had such an impact. Driven by Steven Levitt, the enfant terrible of the scene, and moulded by friendly journalist Stephen Dubner, Freakonomics is about the application of statistical modelling to real world data. Examples include Levitt's work to prove that the huge drop in violent crime in the US in the 1990s was caused by the legalisation of abortion in 1973. As he argues this significantly impacted the number of births among poorer women who didn't previously have access to illegal abortions, and because their progeny would have been more likely to commit such crimes, the result 20-odd years later was a mysterious outbreak of peace in US cities. Less controversial analysis delves into the structure of crack cocaine gangs, which demonstrates that as with other industries such as acting and music, while the rewards at the top are great, the foot soldiers earn less than minimum wage. And, in the case of drug dealers at least, their likelihood of dying within the next year is higher than if they were on death row. Sadly, those two nuggets are about the measure of the book, which then strays off into a prolonged discussion of the choice of baby names amongst socio-economic groups. Still, the underlying theme of questioning conventional wisdom remains a solid one, just not as radical as the overhyped title otherwise suggests.



Author: Dan Simmons
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07262 8

OLYMPOS

Time travel, gods, wormholes, Proust and Shakespeare

Taking up the reins from where the first book, Ilium, left off, Dan Simmons wastes no time in getting straight into the myriad strands of action in Olympos. Of course, 600 pages into the plot, things have got a little more complex. What started off as peculiar tale of how the Greeks and Trojans were refighting their ancient war so the gods could work out if Homer's mythology was correct has taken a major twist. Now it becomes clear that the gods themselves have been set up by intellects unknown, with the actual location of Troy being a terraformed version of Mars, which is in a parallel universe but linked by a wormhole to a futuristic earth which has fallen onto hard times.

The Proust and Shakespeare-spouting robots are back too, but now joined by an invasion army, they are setting course for Earth to try and work out who's behind such meddling with the natural order. And down on Earth, by some convoluted freak of time travel, Greek hero Odysseus is fighting with the few thousand remaining humans for his life as an evil massive brain which is propelled by many hands turns up and starts another ice age. Confused? Intrigued? Somewhere between the two is the spark required to get drawn into a story that really doesn't make much sense, but somehow manages to keep you holding on as its disparate strands are slowly drawn into a sharp conclusion. Just don't take it too seriously.

Evil Dead: Regeneration
FORMAT: PC, PS2, XBOX **PUBLISHER:** THQ



Klaatu barada... hopefully, from yet another thirdperson angle, THQ will successfully remember the magic formula behind Bruce Campbell and Sam Raimi's evidently inimitable horrorshow

Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories
FORMAT: PSP **PUBLISHER:** ROCKSTAR GAMES



Though it'll likely corroborate Rockstar's claims of a radically new handheld experience, just how the PSP's battery endures *GTA*'s stream (or, indeed, torrent) of urban minutiae remains to be seen

Tales of Legendia
FORMAT: PS2 **PUBLISHER:** NAMCO



Interesting skill activation and technique acquisition systems look set to make a page-turner of *Legendia*'s 30-hour storyline, before it then serves up a further 25 hours of optional subquests

Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan!
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO



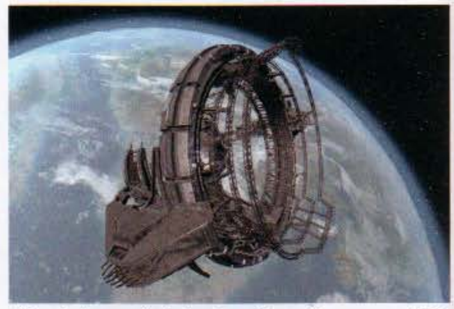
The dual-screen double act of *Gitaroo Man* developer INIS and Nintendo promises a musical marathon well worth cheering for, even if its weighty soundtrack consists mostly of cover versions

Sangokushi DS
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** KOEI



Another spare moment is reliably filled by the Three Kingdoms, revisiting the series' third title with innovative wifi multiplayer and a dual-screen split between command and observation

X3: Reunion
FORMAT: PC **PUBLISHER:** DEEP SILVER



It'll surely become the hot benchmarking tool for tomorrow's PCs, but can a 'vastly improved' version of its Artificial Life dynamic-content engine release *X3* from the orbit of its flawed heritage?

The Sims 2
FORMAT: DS, PSP **PUBLISHER:** EA



Touchscreen object management and activities versus widescreen clarity and streamlined systems: a clash of personalities seems inevitable between Maxis' uniquely tailored handheld couple

Super Mario Stadium: Miracle Baseball
FORMAT: GC **PUBLISHER:** NINTENDO

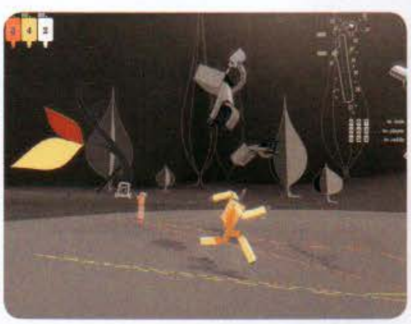


Leading Nintendo's latest sporting season, *Baseball* lines up four-way multiplayer, a bevvy of distracting minigames and over 50 characters for a traditional yet unpredictable arcade pitch

Tamagotchi
FORMAT: DS **PUBLISHER:** BANDAI



With a long time to go before DS owners commit their previous digital pets to their kennels, the genre's forefather comes begging for attention, unlikely to leave without being spoilt



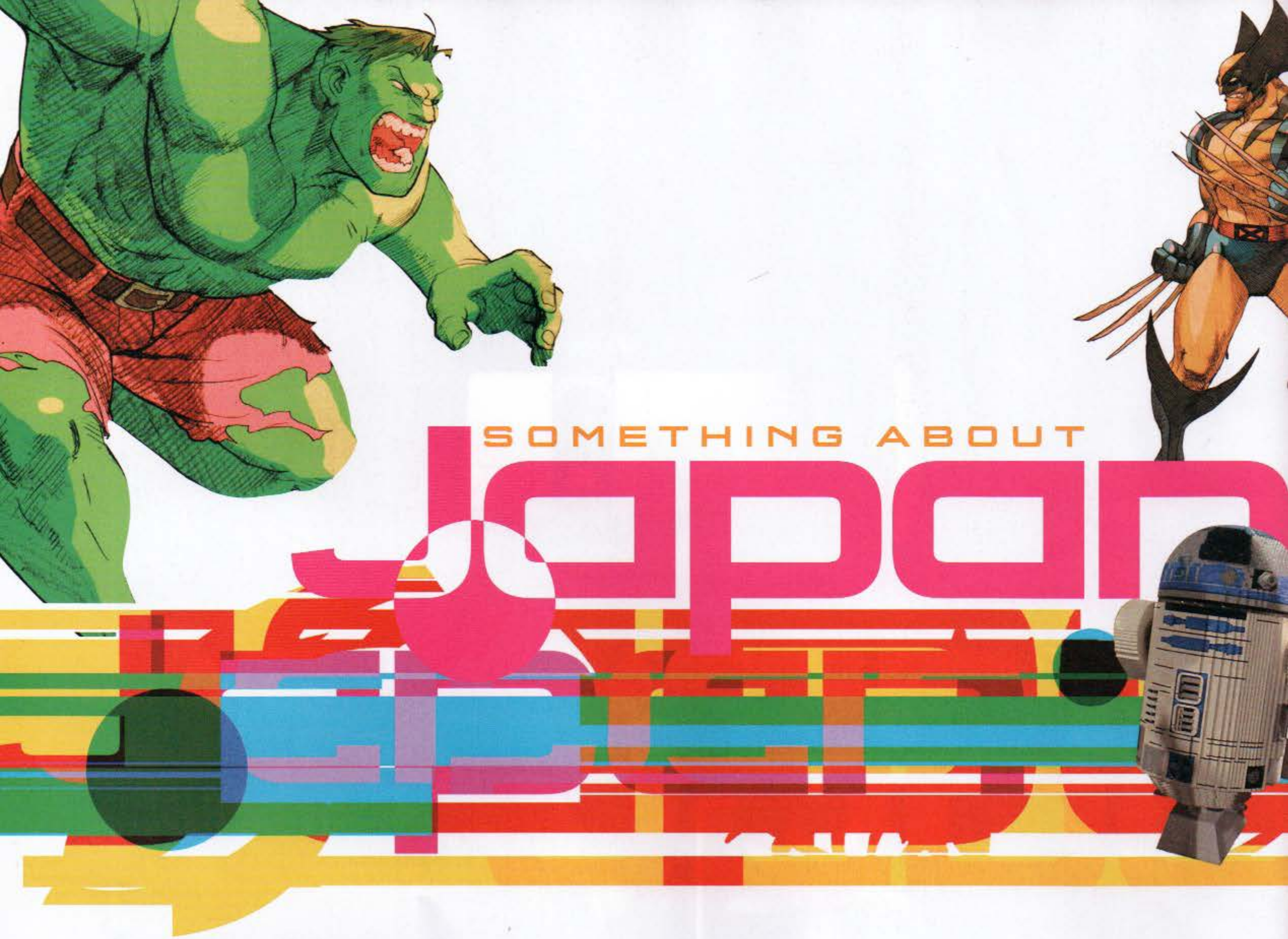
INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH
Golf?

www.golfquestionmark.com

Drawn in limited-palette vectors equal parts Joan Miro, Acme Novelty Library and *Darwinia*, *Golf?* has a unique style and, for a game in early beta, manages a fair bit of substance.

Played solo or over the net, *Golf?* ditches the typical power-meter system for an analogue horizontal mouse-swish swing and putt that allows for a surprising amount of finesse. But it's the environments that are the true draw, all 19th century futurism, with monolithic pipe-smoking giants dominating the dreamscape, delicately laced with the persistent suspended trails of your ball's flight path. Your cart – seemingly inspired by *Half Life 2*'s buggy – is a diversion in itself, whether openly exploring the greens (or monochromes, here) or boosting yourself over the odd wireframe stunt ramp.

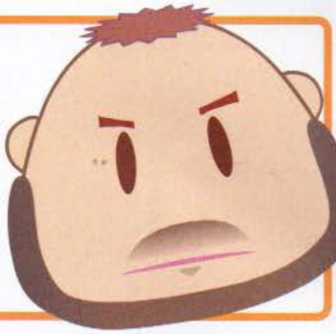
Golf? is a work-in-progress – its relative silence stifling beyond dream-like believability, its cart physics a bit too loose and its booze-swilling levitating caddybots desperate for a more inclusive purpose – but even in its current state it's a solid proof-of-concept, and a game well worth watching.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Conventional wisdom

Japanese game producer Brick Bardo is looking for the passion



I'm sure that, from the things I write in my column, I've convinced many of you that I'm always attending some event or other somewhere in Japan or overseas. In reality, however, I'm an everyday worker like everyone else – one who doesn't like writing about the grind, about the work that I do or the people I meet. Given how much of my time is occupied by such things, however, there really is little that I can actually allow myself to write about. Hence the amount I write about the events I attend, and the fact that I'm about to do so again!

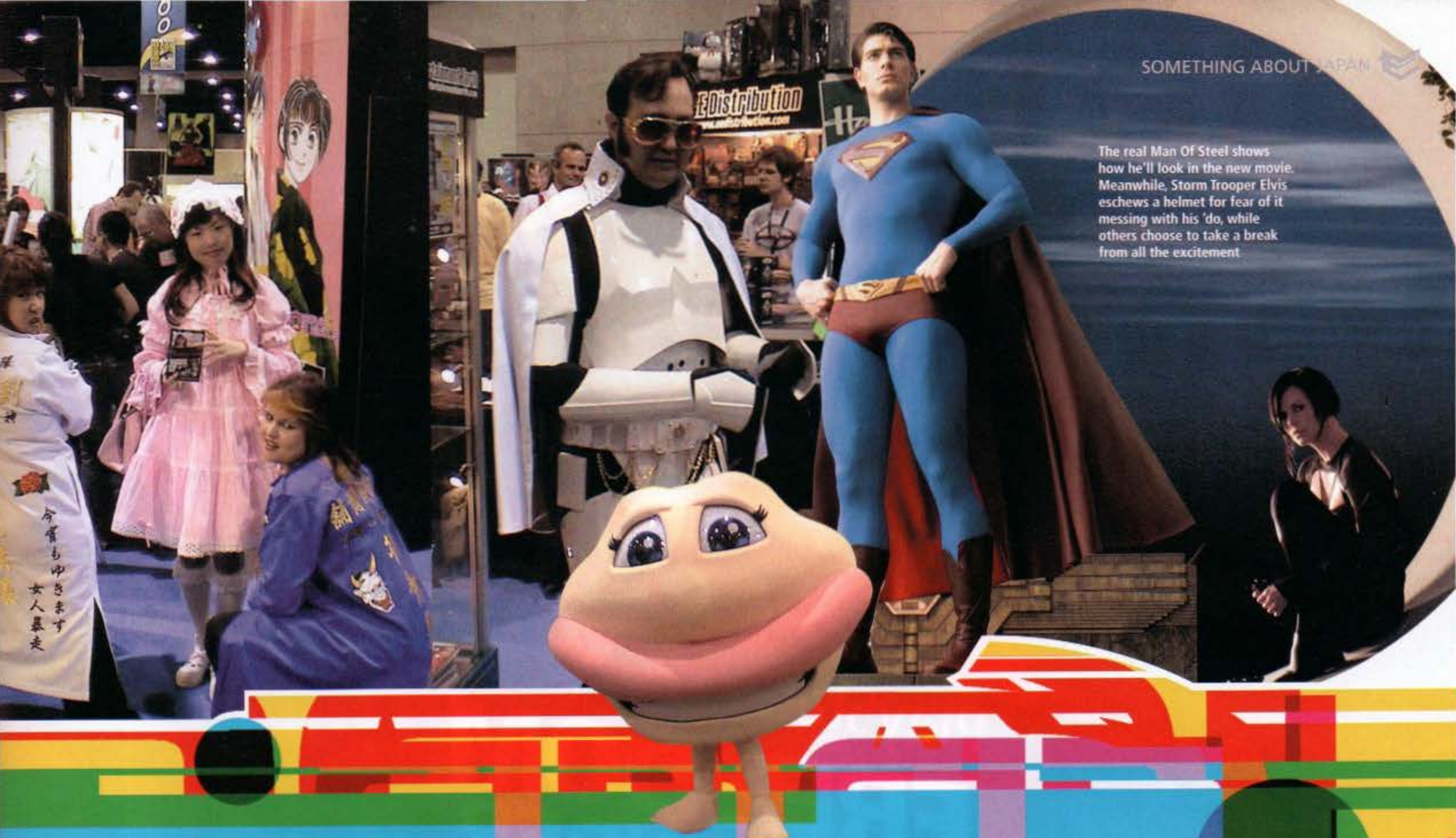
Today, I'm at the Comic-Con International 2005. It's the world's biggest comic-book event, taking place this year for the 36th time. Outside the San Diego Convention Center as I arrived were hundreds of people queuing, some in cosplay, others merely in T-shirts bearing their favourite comic-book characters. I finally got inside after a long wait, discovering what I could only describe as an otaku kingdom. While I hasten to add that this is a business trip rather than a personal venture, I'll admit that there are none of my titles being shown, and that I'm actually having a relaxing time walking the convention floor. Simultaneously, however, there's something here that's making me anxious.

The first thing that strikes you at Comic-Con is the scale – one I can only assume to be increasing greatly as time goes by. There are series upon series of desks where people sell incredible varieties of goods, but there are also booths which play host to the artists and authors of the comics themselves. Animations and other movies are shown in theatres while talks and workshops occur nearby. Among these numerous activities, though, the major companies have their (naturally bigger) booths and they're a hard presence to ignore – they're simply massive. Of course, you'll find the big US players: Marvel, DC and Dark Horse, for example. You'll also find Japanese giants and their US representatives – companies like Viz Media and Tokyo Pop. Moreover, the closure of the Star Wars saga has flooded the various stands with merchandise that testifies to its continued impact.

What was formerly known simply as a sci-fi convention has evolved from a fan event to an integration of animation, movies, videogames and toys. Having effectively become the world's greatest otaku pop-culture event, it marks the emergence of a wider market that's throwing very different industries together on the same shelves and, in this instance, in the same cavernous room. The games industry is therefore here, represented by many of the big names – Nintendo, SCE, etc. But as I walk between those with whom I often work, and those of other disciplines, I find myself almost embarrassed by my professional associates.

What was formerly known simply as a sci-fi convention has evolved from a fan event to an integration of animation, movies, videogames and toys. It marks the emergence of a market that's throwing very different industries together

I'd like to say that, as well as a game maker, I'm a fan as well. Here, like many other people, I'm



The real Man Of Steel shows how he'll look in the new movie. Meanwhile, Storm Trooper Elvis eschews a helmet for fear of it messing with his 'do, while others choose to take a break from all the excitement







queuing to get the autographs of celebrities while buying work from artists and other creators that I find cool. Again, seriously, this is a business trip – but come on, look at who's here! Stan Lee, Neal Adams, Mike Mignola, Simon Bisley, Alex Ross and, incredibly, Ray Harryhausen – I'm just so excited. And yet there are people here from my line of work who are thinking: 'Who the hell are these guys?' Ideally, I wouldn't be working with people who think like this.

People in the comics industry are very passionate about their market, and that irritates me. I'm not irritated by their passion, of course, but what it implies when you stand it alongside our own industry – cool, calm and aloof as it is from its active admirers on show floors such as these. Games industry people are here who see it as little more than a business opportunity. A culture is developing around them in this convention centre and, as much as they recognise its value as sound currency, they remain unaware of its true significance – its enthusiasm.

How common it is in the games industry, I'm reminded here, for a gulf to exist between the market and the marketer. How often it is that a bad game is made thanks to its creator's detachment from their audience. Maybe it's because this is my first Comic-Con, because I have a very Japanese outlook, or because I'm part of an old guard of videogame creators, but surely I'm right to convince myself that we need to be more excited about our work. These, after all, are games that we're in the business of making.





The Comic-Con International 2005 showfloor (above) is more of a hive of activity than any of its game-related cousins' equivalents. The event also promotes more cosplay activity, even if some of it may not stand up particularly sturdily against its inspiration (left). Importantly, the event gives fans the opportunity to witness scene celebs in the flesh, including Ray Harryhausen and Kevin Smith (above left)

Hype

The future of electronic entertainment











Edge's most wanted

Makai Kingdoms: The Chronicles of the Sacred Tome



After the interesting but gentle letdowns of *Phantom Brave* and *La Pucelle*, the prospect of the English translation of a real successor to *Disgaea* is an irresistible prospect.
PS2, NIS AMERICA

Stubbs The Zombie



The magnificently tasteless recent trailer was enough to whet already bloodthirsty appetites. Stubbs already has more charisma than a dozen gurning men-with-guns.
PC, MAC, XBOX, ASPYR

Urban Reign



As the resurgence of the brawling genre escalates into a battle royale, the *Tekken*-powered choreography and scenery-rocking force of *Reign* looks certain to leave its mark.
PS2, NAMCO

The penny ante

Why Xbox 360 has coin-ops at its heart

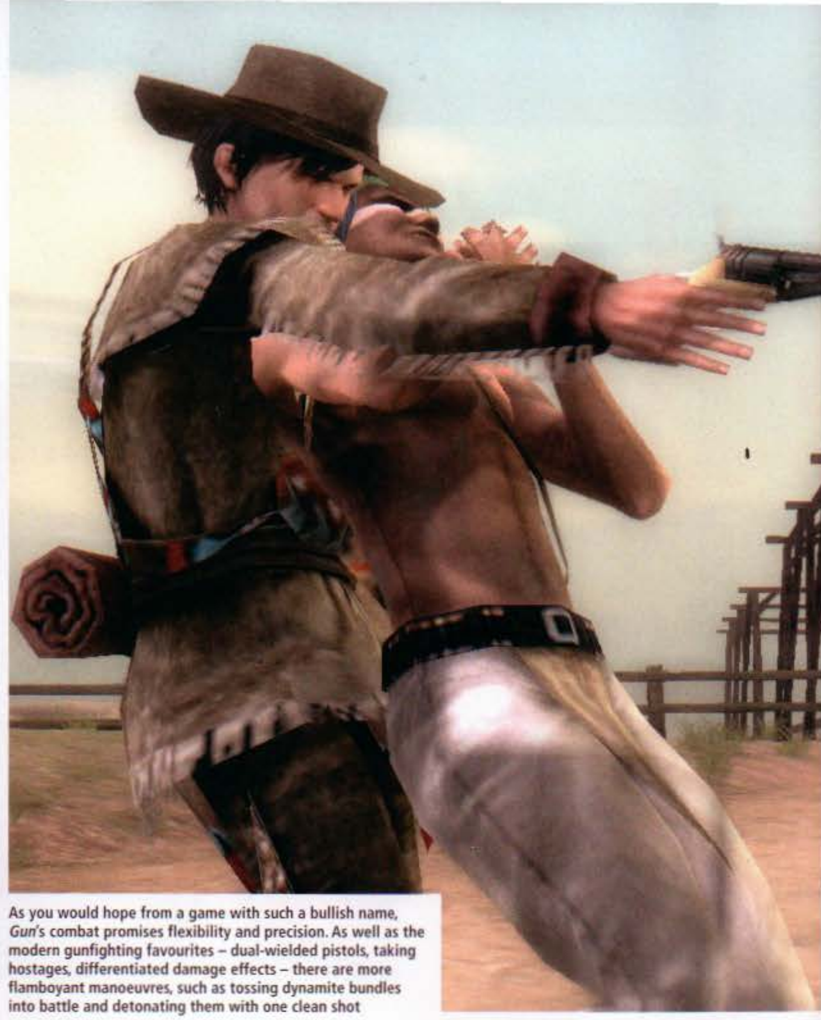


Projects like Jeff Minter's Neon, which stretch the definition of gaming while appealing to an unusually wide audience, will be crucial for the 360 to maximise the potential of its new, more democratic, vision of Xbox and Xbox Live

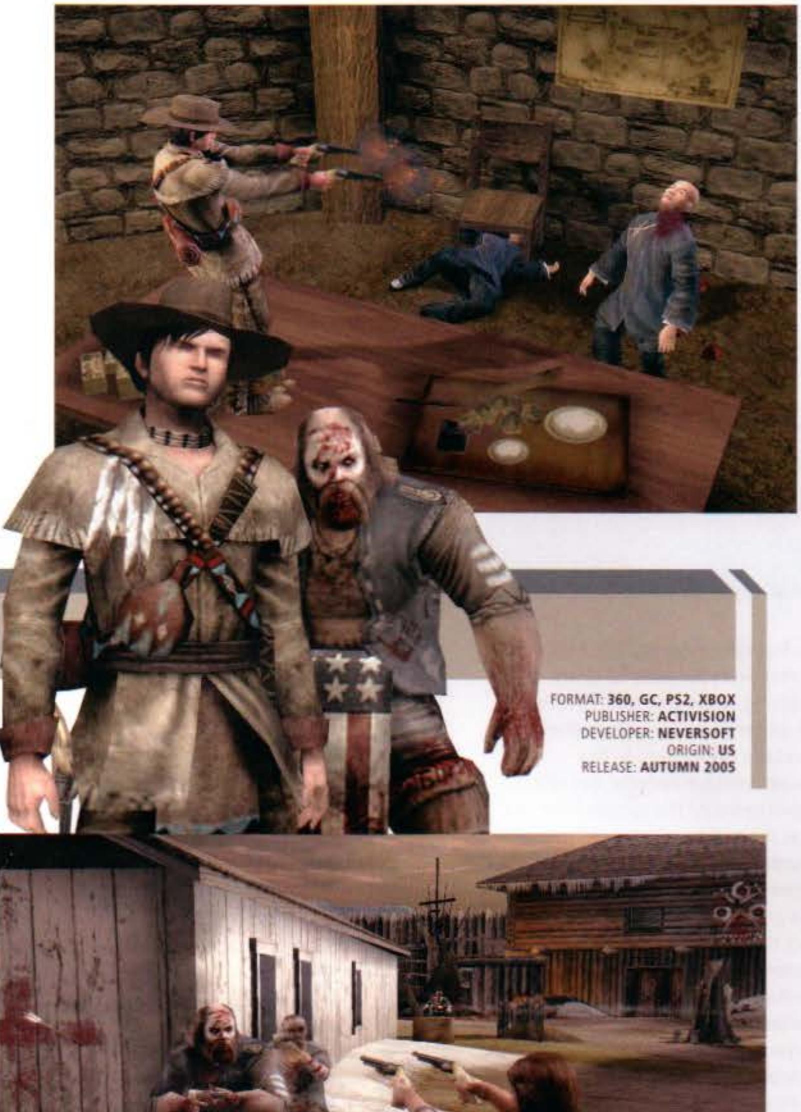
Project Gotham 3 looks breathtaking; *Test Drive Unlimited* gleams off the page; the engine behind *Just Cause* dazzles with natural beauty. Hundreds of people, hundreds of thousands of pounds' worth of technology, slaving to deliver on the next-generation dream. And yet, when you get your 360 home, it's entirely probably that the first things you'll play will be coded by a couple of old friends in London, or some bloke in a field in Wales.

Many had long since finished mourning the bedroom coding scene – the scale of even the most incidental of projects growing to the point that Flash or Shockwave games could take a team of many talents, that mods could require cooperation spread across months as well as continents. It had always survived, of course, nestling into cracks in the gaming ecosystem – emulators, indie shmups, remakes. Now it has support from a very unexpected corner: Microsoft. The commitment given to projects like Jeff Minter's Neon and to games like PomPom's *Mutant Storm Reloaded* (see page 64) radically changes the landscape for small-scale game makers. It's not a panacea – Microsoft is clear that it's not deregulating the 360: games will still need to meet exacting standards and fit into an editorial policy before they can take their place in the revamped Live Arcade. But the importance of the system isn't just that it provides a new, reliable income to support the creativity of those coders good enough to make the grade. More significant is the fact that it introduces a new generation of gamers – and perhaps a new generation of non-gamers if the 360's family-friendly communication and entertainment functions work their magic – to the old values of videogaming: abstract art styles, unbridled imagination, game mechanics which depend on simplicity for their intensity, accessibility and instantly rewarding nature.

This isn't a case of retro for retro's sake, it's about infusing a new machine with the ethos of the old. Games used to have to be good enough to make you take money from your pocket and give it to them, minute after minute, to make sure they didn't stop. Why should we expect anything less from the next generation, whether its the work of one man or a hundred?



As you would hope from a game with such a bullish name, *Gun*'s combat promises flexibility and precision. As well as the modern gunfighting favourites – dual-wielded pistols, taking hostages, differentiated damage effects – there are more flamboyant manoeuvres, such as tossing dynamite bundles into battle and detonating them with one clean shot



FORMAT: **360, GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **NEVERSOFT**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005**

Gun

Far from being a one-trick pony, Neversoft saddles up to take on the wild west all guns blazing

Sometimes a name is enough. When the teaser trailer for Neversoft's *Gun* hit at E3, the simple conjunction of those two words was enough to grab everyone's attention. It had long been known that Neversoft was going to diversify from its Tony Hawk empire to work on a very different property, but there was little more than pure speculation on what it might be. And then: bang! There was *Gun*. The trailer was enough at odds with the *Tony Hawk's* easygoing tone to pique interest – bloody, pounding and flash-cut with enough subliminal viciousness to unsettle even those hardened by long careers of gaming violence.

But that was only the first surprise because, in the flesh, the game is as much at odds with that trailer as the trailer was to most people's perception of Neversoft. *Gun* is a wild west epic, intended to hit every gun-toting, whisky-swilling, brothel-raiding, horse-wrangling, fast-duelling sweetspot without ever descending to dumb, lazy stereotype. There's an extent to which that's all the needs to be said, because the odds are that the answer to any likely follow-up question is a simple 'yes'. Can you ride into town guns blazing and take out the bandits? Yes. Can you blast people backwards through swinging saloon doors? Yes. Can you ride shotgun with the stagecoach, ears cocked for the inevitable ambush? Herd cattle and befriend local Indian tribes? Take to the rooftops and interrupt an unjust hanging? Yes, yes and yes.

> Can you blast people backwards through swinging saloon doors? Herd cattle? Ride shotgun with the stagecoach, ears cocked for the inevitable ambush? Yes, yes and yes

Not that this is simply a freeform game o[f] cowboy indulgence. There's weight to the central character: trained as a hunter, hero Colton is an experienced marksman, used t[o] relying on his guns for his own survival. And there's a strong story for him to follow – wit[h] a father's murder to avenge and a mysteriou[s] prostitute to find. This quest forms the main mission structure of the game, as Colton



Although it's clear that a great deal of research and a genuine affection for frontier history has gone into *Gun*, it's also clear that Neversoft is more than willing to revel in the larger-than-life aspects of the myths that have built up around life in the wild west



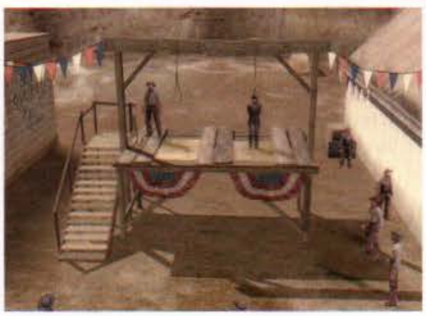






The quality of animation for the horses is outstanding, giving a real sense of movement and muscle. You have a full, free 360-degree aim while riding, allowing for fast-paced, freeform battles. While these look spectacular, it won't be until a playable build is made available that it will become clear how satisfying the control scheme is







Raising Indiana

As Colton progresses through his adventure, his life becomes more and more tied up with a local Indian tribe. Adopting their dress, he also gains access to their weapons – wielding flaming arrows and particularly hefty tomahawks later in the game – and to some extent their tactics, relying on the speed of his horse and the sneakiness of a canoe shortcut to offset the risk of a frontal attack in the game's later high-octane battles. Although the game does enable you to scalp your victims, don't be tempted to assign that practice to your set of Indian skills: in keeping with the game's intent to be historically accurate, scalping is something instigated by the whites.

travels to new towns, forges new alliances and earns himself new enemies.

Around this core, however, Neversoft is promising a wealth of content. There's nothing to stop Colton riding into the sunset, looking to discover new ranches or Indian settlements, stopping to replenish his cash supplies by doing a spot of hunting, or taking on mercenary tasks. Although unannounced, it's tempting to assume that the game will give full scope to the kind of minigames you'd hope to see – poker, surely.

The comparisons to *San Andreas*' rural excursions are hard to avoid, and it's already clear than *Gun* hopes to capture that game's sense of scale and possibility. But here's where the name comes in again. No one bold enough to call their game *Gun* is going to risk delivering something with combat as woolly as *GTA*'s. This game's gunplay is elaborate: flicking into firstperson for quasi-bullet-time precision, calling on you to aim at ankles and wrists to disable and disarm opponents, forcing you to think about reloading patterns as you blast away with twin pistols, demanding careful manoeuvring as you fight on horseback, tracking targets moving as swiftly as yourself. Without an extended playtest it's impossible to judge if that elaboration will translate to satisfaction, but there's no disputing the effort that's gone into the raw material for a meaty shooter.

The 360 version is likely to be sumptuous, but the odds are it won't be able to impress as much as the PS2 version: everyone already expects great things from next-gen, but equally everyone already has a measure of just how hard it is to wring this level of smooth, dense beauty out of the older machine. Not that its just a technical achievement – *Gun* makes the most of its natural palette, filling the skies with wide, airy blues and cloaking the ground with dusty reds and dewy greens. The animation is also strong, with the sheen of your horse's coat dipping and shifting as the muscles move and weight shifts from leg to leg.

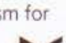
It's been a brave move – taking the game from drawing board to near-completion in secluded secrecy. Now Activision has a few short months to fire gamers' enthusiasm for *Gun*: on present form, it won't be a difficult task.



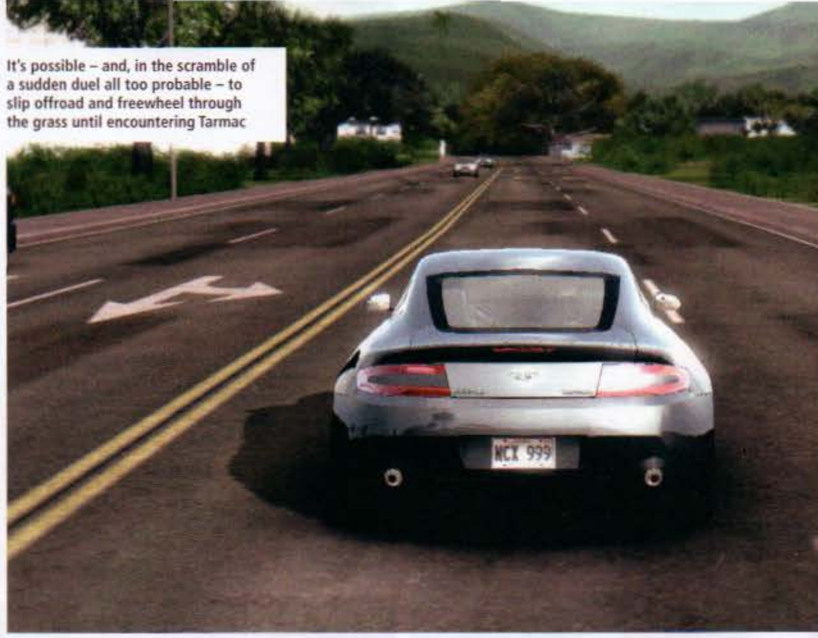




Colton's association with a local native tribe doesn't just change his appearance. It also provides a change of pace in the gameplay, encouraging stealthier combat







It's possible – and, in the scramble of a sudden duel all too probable – to slip offroad and freewheel through the grass until encountering Tarmac

FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **EDEN GAMES**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **MARCH 2006**

Test Drive Unlimited

Test Drive returns: older, wiser, online, and with 'street' mercifully limited to the surface you drive on



In 1987, *Test Drive* was as much a romance as a driving game, an unabashed fantasy roleplay of those twin American dreams: the open road and the gull-winged supercar. Since then, the road racing genre's priorities have drifted from leisurely affairs to epilepticly intense speed-dating, and the *Test Drive* name has languished in ill-fitting brand pile-ups such as *Eve Of Destruction*.

So while it may seem odd that the keys to a quintessentially American experience have been handed to a French developer, *V-Rally* creator Eden has produced a concept that looks back to *Test Drive*'s beginnings and ahead for the genre as a whole. This manifesto is apparent from the first glimpse of the game's Hawaiian location, putting miles of clear Pacific water between *Unlimited*'s tropical highways and the bleached urbanity of its competitors. It's an affluent driving paradise that stretches further than the lavishly modelled car interiors: play opens not in a garage, but the carefully arranged lounge of your hilltop estate, where your custom avatar reclines overlooking blue sky and swaying fronds.

Here, choosing your designer-label outfit is at least as important as choosing your ride as your personal style will be on display both behind the wheel and in the multiplayer lobbies. Instead of impersonal text lists, *Unlimited*'s lobbies take the form of commo drive-in areas or player-created VIP clubs dotted across the island, an approach to community that sees studio head **Stephane Baudet** reference *World Of WarCraft* as often as he does *Gran Turismo* or *Forza*. "Most online driving games are an offline game with an online component," he says, "and we're doing the opposite."

As soon as a player pulls out of their driveway into the dauntingly large gameworld (recreating the entire island of Oahu with an eye for 'enhanced gamepla experience' rather than fastidious accuracy),



The hazy filters drenching the proof-of-concept video are still to be applied to the actual game (apart from the sharp Pacific sun glare) – the 360 should let them be rendered in realtime



Visiting a car dealership (or one of your garages) allows you to freely view vehicles, *PGR2*-style, from any angle, as well as pop the doors – to the accurately sampled sound of a five-figure price tag – to inspect the interior



Detailed dashboard views have long been a *Test Drive* tradition, and *Unlimited*'s fully modelled interiors don't skimp in this respect. As your avatar's head responds to freelook, it's also possible to challenge your opponent in a withering staredown at the starting line









Unlimited features a gentle dawn-to-dusk cycle. There are no night races, but breaking tropical storms should ensure there's still a use for those reflective road effects

they're an online presence. *Unlimited* isn't a true MMO, considering the gridlock that would ensue from the global population, but an ideal multiplayer world for each player, with server-side calculations displaying the 16 closest players with matching profiles. Flashing your headlights at one initiates an immediate duel, or you can tail them to a lobby area for a larger event: either way, it's in setting the rules for these face-offs that *Unlimited* lives up to its name.

Races can be tracked anywhere across the island's roads, from a ten-second drag to the four-hour marathon of the coastal loop, chosen from among straight races, time attacks, speed runs or capture the flag sessions, with or without traffic or police (in original *Test Drive* style, police aren't crazed dodgems but rather pace cars, immediately ending your race with a fine if they overtake you). "Each day we're finding new modes," says Baudet, "like 'No using brakes'."

Between competitive sessions there are solo challenges to be discovered, and random point-to-point driving missions such as ferrying female shoppers between malls, or delivering hitchhikers to the airport. There's also the sheer joy of driving, with the combination of an expansive draw distance, open environment and the ability to drop the electric windows and pump up the radio volume with a flick of the D-pad proving sinfully luxurious. But exploration can be costly – not due to the originally intended feature of having to refuel, since pulled due to 'being boring', but in discovering the car dealers and mod shops supplying Oahu's virtual economy.

Cars and car parts are ranked in rarity, including limited editions that fleetingly appear on the market before being taken out of production. It's a similar set-up to collectible card games, something Eden has obviously considered, as the current UI displays parts as exactly that – trading cards, which are dragged into spare slots on a car to apply the modification. Trading with other players is performed over an eBay-styled auction system, including the requirement that you supply virtual photographs of your goods to accompany that crucial all-caps headline. "*Forza* introduced the trading concept, but I found it a little impractical. This is the next-generation version," Baudet explains. It's mentioned that eBay itself has been approached to lend its appearance to *Unlimited*'s virtual version; the issue of bidding real-world money on virtual sports cars, though, remains undecided.

It's testament to *Unlimited*'s intoxicating vision that it can take until the final paragraph of a preview to mention how it actually drives, and in its current state – largely still the E3 build – this aspect requires, and is receiving, attention. Handling feels both cold and slightly samey among the available cars, and is unfinished on the bikes: incomplete physics further complicate matters. Now rescheduled to be fashionably late to the 360 launch, though, there's time for Eden to make good on that *Test Drive* dream, and springboard it back to relevance for a generation that might need a little open-top dreaming more than ever.

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Radio activity

Unlimited's radio stations are intended to be streaming broadcasts of real-world stations, with a two-way relationship including *Unlimited*-related announcements (such as events and rankings) being transmitted to the real world as well as the game community. Market-specific stations have been approached in each territory, but players with less radio-friendly tastes can also choose to stream their playlists from media player or PC. Similar deals may be in the works for television, suggesting the picture-within-a-picture insanity of watching a television broadcast of you playing the game while watching the in-car television broadcast of you playing.







FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **CRITERION**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

Burnout Revenge

Doubly furious without feeling rushed, Criterion's racer weaves and smashes its way into view

As in *Takedown*, *Revenge* has elevated its portrayal of vehicular butchery, throwing out more sparks and particles from its collisions. The degree to which Criterion has been able to expand each car's damage modelling is surprising





You'll have to excuse us for feeling somewhat awkward when asking Criterion's creative director **Alex Ward** whether or not *Burnout* is moving too quickly. We have to, of course, now that his studio has fallen beneath the umbrella of EA – a publisher famed for flogging its properties until they have little left to bleed. But it's hard to deny that, for all the velocity with which the game has thundered from comparative obscurity to massmarket recognition, from arcade street racing to actively publicised 'battle racing', there's been more than enough momentum to justify the pace. And with such a quick turnaround between the last instalment and the latest, circumstances demand that we know who's really behind the wheel.

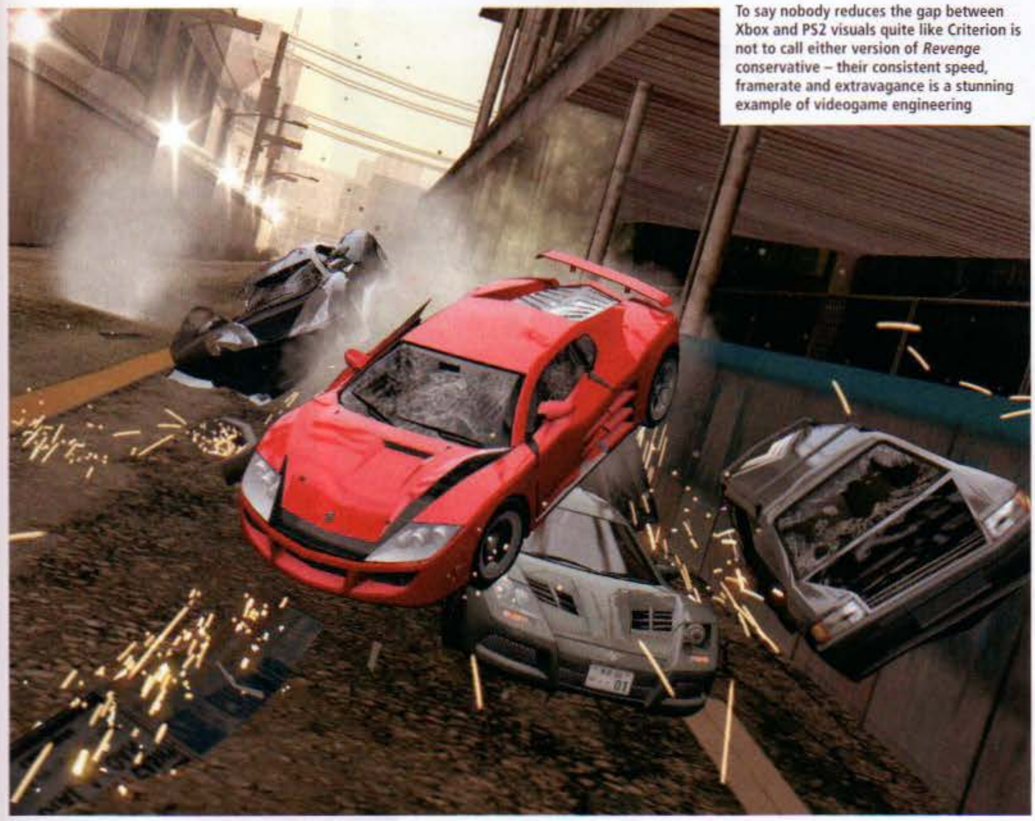
"This is the classic thing," remarks Ward. "There's always a big internet rumour – people think we get told what to do. Actually, as a development studio, that's never been the case for us. After *Takedown* – our most successful game ever – we'd have been nuts not to make another one. People like to entertain the conspiracy that we get told what to do and that we'll make it an annual franchise, but I'll tell you 100 per cent that's not true. If the guys at Electronic Arts told me we were going to make *Burnout* every year, then personally I wouldn't want to do it."

Whether or not you choose to believe this, it's a pleasure to reveal that *Burnout Revenge* amply provides the technical brilliance and raw invention to sideline such questions of autonomy. The series has again repositioned, refined and redefined itself with a level of gusto that eclipses that found in most franchises' entire lifecycles.

Like its immediate predecessor, *Revenge* is an absolute showstopper when it comes to visual impact. Reports of the game adopting a more realistic visual stance can now, thankfully, be replaced by the knowledge that its snow-covered peaks, gridlocked highways, sun-scorched cities and deep groves are more dazzling than ever, adopting a much wider geographical repertoire than before while being rendered at the same immense speeds.

Reports of the game adopting a more realistic stance can be replaced by the knowledge that its gridlocked highways and sun-scorched cities are more dazzling than ever

Funnily, however, the game's rather obvious title not only indicates a less momentous change to its dynamic than takedowns were a year ago, but fails to suggest a more important, striking design decision that's guaranteed to have fans squabbling and mouths agape. Traffic checking, as it's known, means that driving on the right side of the road in *Revenge* makes you invulnerable to all but the largest of vehicles. You can literally plough through whole jams of traffic provided it's facing the right way, a storm of vehicles then spiralling into the air that would make Roland Emmerich blush. Inspired, we're told, by the



To say nobody reduces the gap between Xbox and PS2 visuals quite like Criterion is not to call either version of *Revenge* conservative – their consistent speed, framerate and extravagance is a stunning example of videogame engineering

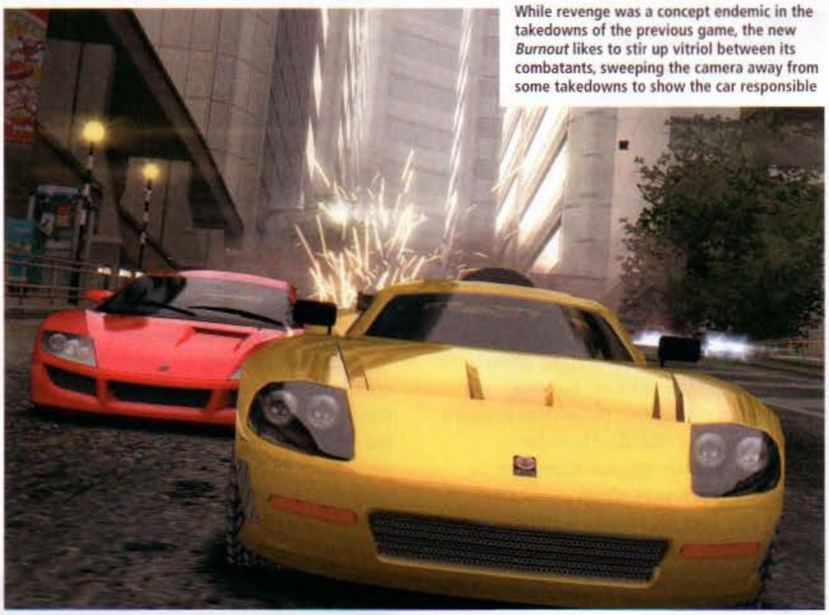


car chase in Bad Boys II, this feature then provides the basis for a new Traffic Attack mode, where the preset duration of the challenge must be prolonged through the continuous destruction of other road users.

Despite initial reservations as to its effect on the innate thrill of traffic-dodging in *Burnout*, it isn't long before this major adjustment feels worthy, just as the notion of using 'crashbreakers' (the self-detonation option of the last game's revised Crash mode) during aftertouch takedowns ultimately makes sense. "With aftertouch," says Ward, "we'd experimented with a freestyle camera and with various camera controls on the stick, but it's such a fast-paced game that it's hard to create a camera system that will capture everything. We wanted to make aftertouch takedowns easier because they were cool but hard to do." Though it's (fortunately, we feel) only available in certain races, the aftertouch crashbreaker certainly provides a sizeable shockwave of compensation for the anticlimax of the occasional lethargic pile-up.

In its dedicated Crash mode, the game is introducing another drastic change that has us impressed from the outset. The golf analogy Criterion has been touting for some time is now most certainly appropriate. Whereas previously the best of starts was a simple burst of speed to encourage a more potent crash, now it's enabled by a vertical swing-o-meter which, when tapped at its apex, determines speed, and when tapped at its base determines accuracy, an inaccurate boost causing your car to fidget left and right while you struggle for position. The icon power-ups of *Takedown* are gone, and it seems likely that the result will be a welcome return to more open-ended and less obvious crash trajectories, the optimum path no longer being a join-the-dots puzzle of multipliers and crashbreakers. High-altitude jumps now feature side winds, demanding that aftertouch be applied to steer the car home. Once the ensuing carnage has begun to settle, an adjusted crashbreaker provides a final blast that can now be maximised by frantic button-mashing, quirkily topping off a revised competitive event that guarantees a far greater scope for variety.

With these and the myriad changes that accompany them, the degree to which *Burnout* can be successfully burdened with new ideas continues to amaze. Does Ward worry that it can only support so much? "You know what?" he replies. "No. You've got to ask that about the other driving games, because they're either stuck in a framework of motor sports or a framework of street racing. I look at them and think, 'How many more variations of driving can you offer?' *Burnout* is made up by us – we completely own it. If we want to blow the car up, we'll blow the car up. We can try anything in our software, and that's the real fun of working on it, we're one of the few racing games out there that's only limited by imagination. Personally, I think we're still only scratching the surface."



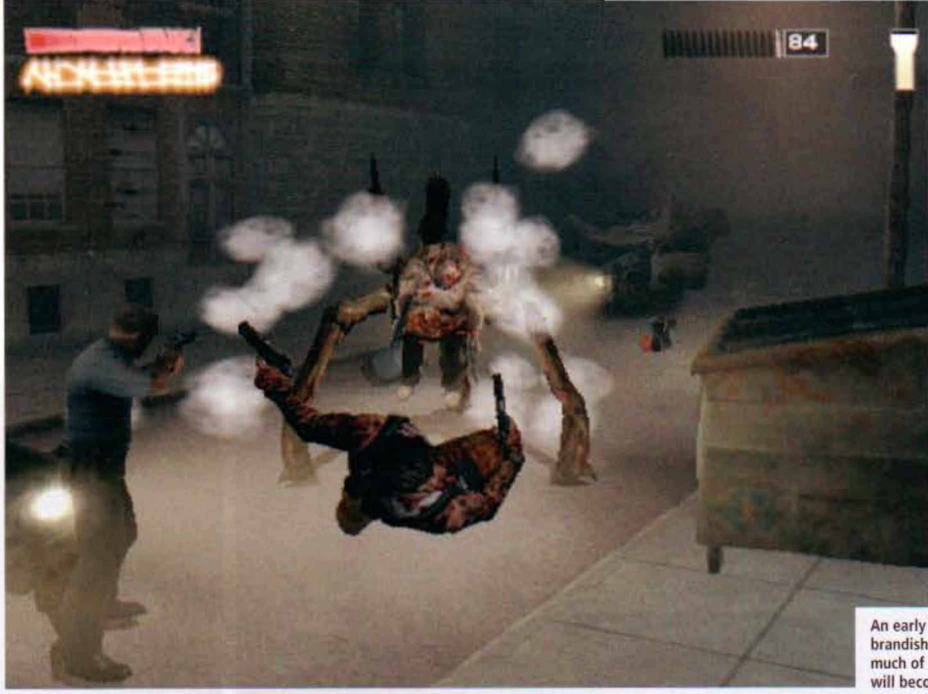
While revenge was a concept endemic in the takedowns of the previous game, the new *Burnout* likes to stir up vitriol between its combatants, sweeping the camera away from some takedowns to show the car responsible



The road worrier

Perhaps the greatest concern of *Burnout* fans, as instilled by the previous game, is the success with which *Revenge*'s online and multiplayer components can extend its appeal. Without slipping into a condemnation of EA's lamentable distortion of the Xbox Live service into a woefully inefficient mess, it was the basic and very exploitable rules of *Takedown*'s online ranking system that proved equalling galling. "You're always going to get cheaters in any game," Ward assures us, "especially online. I think that the way revenge progression works in this game means that we're smarter at detecting people exploiting set patterns of play. It's not just based on takedowns this time, and while it's hard to say that people won't be able to cheat at the game because they always find a way, we've spent some time to improve that side of things."





In among the assortment of returning, execution-themed enemies – the blade-arme Slayers, for example – are new opponents, such as this tank-like creature (below), a terror at close range that can be knocked to the ground with a couple of shotgun blasts to neutralise its bulk for a few seconds



An early boss encounter is an arachnid-like threat that brandishes a weapon in each of its many arms. It's not much of a task, however, making it likely that this enemy will become a common sight as the game progresses

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **SURREAL SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN**

The Suffering: Ties That Bind

A taste of freedom for Midway's horror as its lead character goes from jailhouse shocker to Torque of the town



Creative slabs

While the first *Suffering*'s combat was never considered to have any depth, its enemies did – in terms of their conception and the story behind each of their variously tortured forms, at least. *Ties That Bind* extends this thoughtful aspect by including a set of opponents that draw on the horror of the broken urban wasteland that Torque gores his way through.

The Triggerman is a byproduct of gang violence, while The Suppressor (above) is a legless blob with a flashlight for a face – an offshoot of violent prison guards. A serial killer comes in form of The Creeper, whose body is dressed with the parts of his victims.

The Suffering ended in a manner that most games begin. A protagonist dogged by a CV of inner turmoil is no novel thing, but instead of *The Suffering*'s perpetually blood-spattered lead character Torque having his past revealed in flashes, it was actually *decided* in flashes. As the player battled their way through a rotting, hell-infested prison complex, the ferocity of their actions – and respect for human life – were the karmic values that decided whether or not Torque was guilty of the murder of his family for which he was incarcerated. It's a touch that was subtle beyond the game's heavy downpour of schlock, but one continued in this sequel: players can import a save file into *Ties That Bind* in order to continue with their virtuous alignment, or otherwise, or just start afresh.

But *Ties That Bind* has its own past, too, in a game that was solid but was far from sparkling, a cramped and viciously straightforward shooter that felt surprisingly different when played from either of the first- or thirdperson perspectives it offered. And that feeling is echoed here, as Torque bursts his way out of the confines of federal lockdown and into the confines of a Baltimore slum. It's a scumhole of dereliction and filthy corridors, as Torque gets talked through the tutorial of the opening section by Dr Killjoy – a familiar, goading face for returning players – whose advice is aired from a number of flickering screens, most notably that of an abandoned cinema.

There seems to be a greater emphasis on Torque's monster-transform guise this time around: a destructive inner demon fuelled by kills that deals out hefty melee attacks from an enforced thirdperson view, it's now necessary for breaking through cracked walls and other obviously destructible obstacles. There seems to be no worthy idea behind it but to force players to amass plentiful kills from respawning enemies, and it's not clear how such a device will affect Torque's aforementioned morality. Still, this rampant carnage seems to be a more integral feature, meaning Torque's transformed self is given ever more brutal attacks to wield as he descends deeper into madness.

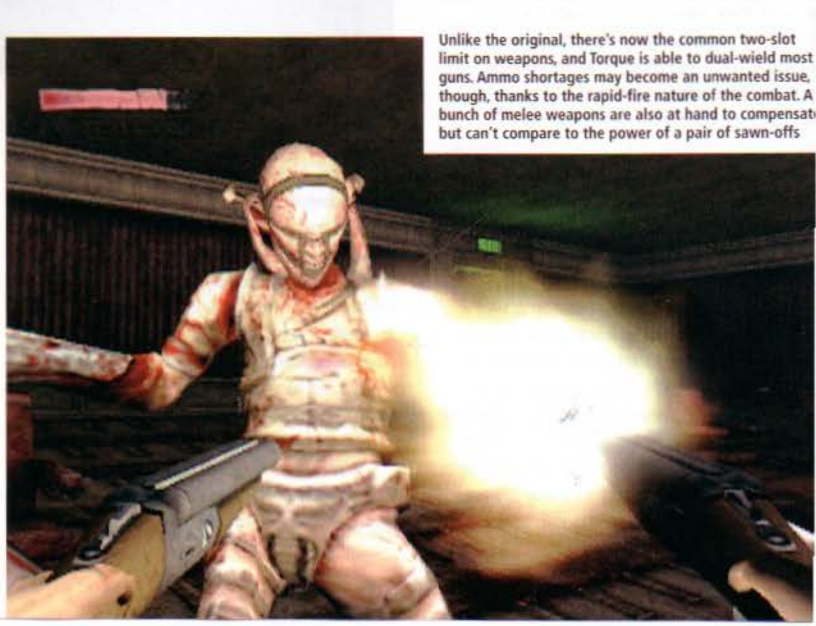
There's a roughness about the game's look in its preview state, however, one that feels especially striking considering just how greatly visual standards have evolved since the original game. But, as *Forza* showed with the clear improvement between its wonky demo and the final product, those final few months of plastic surgery can make an essential difference.



Torque's behaviour – his treatment of innocents (above) and the use of his inner demon form to wreak havoc – will change how players experience the game's story, but it's unclear whether this will lead to multiple paths through the world, or just create variations in the obstacles and creatures that Torque must overcome



Unlike the original, there's now the common two-slot limit on weapons, and Torque is able to dual-wield most guns. Ammo shortages may become an unwanted issue, though, thanks to the rapid-fire nature of the combat. A bunch of melee weapons are also at hand to compensat but can't compare to the power of a pair of sawn-offs





Each level contains well-hidden secrets and optional secondary missions, some of which are played for laughs, such as the quest to deface propaganda posters in an effort to support the efforts of the local resistance





Spartan: Total Warrior

It's a classic tale of an underdog victory, as The Creative Assembly takes on the console world

There are people around the world who'll be annoyed by The Creative Assembly's console debut. No matter how stellar its PC reputation, its first steps on to a format where it has no recent technical experience, nor any familiarity with pacing or presenting a more arcadey, action-oriented style of play, surely ought to have been shaky. Instead they are stunningly assured. *Spartan: Total Warrior* is already technically strong, aesthetically excellent and tailored intelligently for console play.

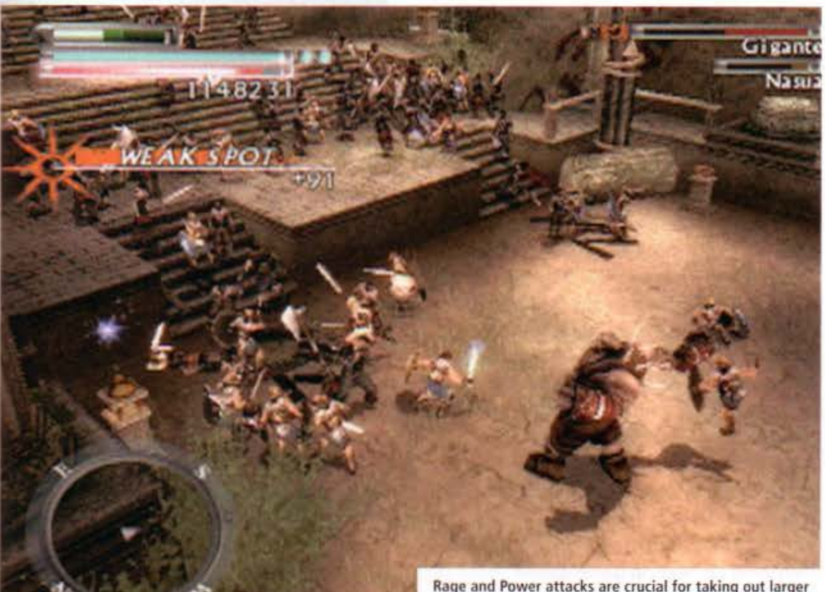
Following the tale of an exceptional Spartan warrior plucked from the ranks and propelled to giant-slaying fame, the game strings together a series of spectacular set-pieces with varied aims and settings but one unifying theme: numbers. From the opening scene where the Romans are scaling the walls of Sparta's beleaguered capital, to a rampage through a barbarian encampment, to a slog through the infested bowels of the ruins of Troy, you'll be fighting mob-handed. Hemmed in by dozens and dozens of opponents, and supported by squads of your own troops, the screen is consistently filled with colour and fury, only your increasingly preposterous attack power keeping your from drowning in a flood of murderous men.

Although the Spartan has an elegantly thought-out move list, this isn't a combo-stringing game. His basic direct and sweeping attacks can be modulated in a number of ways (swords, arrows, frequent Rage moves and rationed, but spectacular, Power attacks), but a good deal of the game's tactical challenge comes from weapon choice. Each opponent, from hulking legionaries with full-length shields to whirling, backflipping assassins, needs a different approach – shields can be crushed by a blow from your barbarian's hammer, assassins can be beaten at their own game with the speed of Athena's twin swords. It's a sound system, currently only held back by the odd absence of configurable controls.

If this is starting to sound quite far removed from the studio's tradition for historical accuracy, then that's because it is: *Total Warrior* is as much Harryhausen as Herodotus. It's interesting to see that this game, along with *God Of War* (which it only superficially resembles), is bringing to western history the might-and-magic approach that has so long been Japanese developers' secret to exploiting their own past. It's a successful mix, the detail of the history bringing weight to your opponents, the splendour of the myths plundered for extraordinary settings and weaponry. The obvious flaws are few – hopefully cut-scenes will be improved before release – but it's clear *Spartan* will be able to stand shoulder to shoulder with the work of teams who have been honing their skills on these consoles since their debut.



Pulling the camera out (above) gives a totally different flavour to exactly the same scene (top) when zoomed in



Rage and Power attacks are crucial for taking out larger opponents. The sense of heroism is tangible as you dash from fight to fight, saving comrades and dealing death

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E152**



Swings and roundabouts

Spartan's arena mode offers a back-against-the-wall survival challenge, pitting the Spartan against wave after wave of enemy troops in a sealed arena. Initially a rather brief thrill, exploration in the main game unlocks helper items which can be taken into the arena with you – fire-arrow pick-ups, for example, as well as health and power altars, which can be used to refill your meters. The most useful is a phalanx of support troops who – although they rarely last more than a few rounds – provide some breathing spaces as well as upping the spectacle dramatically.







The EA doctrine of fanatical signposting continues into *From Russia With Love*'s fighting, close-quarters combat occasionally throwing up button prompts that, if met, result in Bond performing a brief but stylish combo to finish off his opponent

FORMAT: **GC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q3**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

From Russia With Love

The gadget-light, espionage-heavy jewel of the Bond series emerges transformed by the gears of the EA machine



Labour-saving devices

The original From Russia With Love is recognised as being one of James Bond's least gadget-driven endeavours, his well-endowed attaché case in fact representing the first the series had seen. Rather than change its established template accordingly, EA has decided to forgo that chaste quality in favour of a more familiar arsenal. A 'Q-Copter' now replaces the remote-controlled spider from *Everything Or Nothing*, a rappel hook and laser watch also seeing frequent use. Collectable schematics and awards will unlock further equipment, though it's difficult to determine at this stage how well the linear level design will incorporate its use. If one thing is for sure, however, it's that justifying such technical abundance will prove to be a far greater challenge.

If there's one thing EA seems intent on proving, at least with regard to the Bond franchise, it's that its in-house developers struggle when it comes to composition. *Everything Or Nothing* – certainly not the worst game in either the world or the publisher's 007 canon – dodged a certain degree of flak because it felt every bit as haphazard and flung together as any of the more recent Brosnan pics it aimed to complement. But as *From Russia With Love* is now wheeled out with pride by its publisher, and as the gravy train chugs into an altogether more precious, respected domain, so the level of scrutiny must intensify.





Stealth during the early hedge-maze level resembles more a routine of exploiting the near-sighted AI of NPCs

Sadly, looking at the realisation of Bond himself is more than enough to deflate our expectations. Sean Connery's vocal talents make up no ground in crossing the gap between how he sounds today and how he did back in 1963. This is Bond as voiced by The Untouchables' Jim Malone, and it's painfully clear that an impersonator would have likely put in a more convincing performance. Such ironies are what awaits the shopping-list mentality of a game that has simply shaken last year's template in the hope that it resettles into something fresh. It hardly helps that, in the demonstrated build at least, Sir Sean's avatar resembles a zombie with a peculiar itch up its backside.

Something promised as a return to the series' halcyon '60s mode is instead emerging as a translation of that source via a dictionary of latter-day gaming clichés. Levels that rework the movie's hedge-maze opening and crowbar in a fireworks-ridden car chase simply epitomise the developer's readiness to batter the subject matter into a convenient, but fundamentally disrespectful form. With the snapshots it takes of familiar faces, scenes and objects from the original movie, EA becomes no more informed as to the character and substance behind them as any tourist would by blithely firing their camera at randomly arresting sights.

It's startling to think, having reworked the *Everything Or Nothing* game engine (originally split in two and developed by separate racing and action teams) into one unified by RenderWare, that *Russia*'s developers have chosen to not only replicate its year-old structure with only the merest of changes (a zoomed targeting mode and enhanced jumping abilities are the highlights), but have also reproduced many, if not most, of its associated shortcomings. The automated transition from long-range weapons combat to close-range hand-to-hand is just as unwieldy as before, the movement of the character and camera proving equally troublesome.





A training mission, written specifically for the game, has you negotiating London's landmarks in a bid to rescue the abducted Prime Minister. The jetpack has been imported from another Bond movie, Thunderball

None of this is to say, of course, that the final version of *From Russia With Love* won't tick enough boxes to secure it a passable appraisal as a no-brained actioner. For many however, the overriding judgement will remain dominated by thoughts of its clumsy approach.

Beat Down: Fists Of Vengeance

In a genre fenced into an age-old space, Capcom is finding new ways to come out fighting



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **PRODUCTION STUDIO 1**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **Q3**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Just as the 1980s have all the irreclaimable charisma of a lost loved one, so the straight beat 'em up genre, whose garish camp excess survived into the early '90s, has since slipped into something of a vegetative state. *Beat Down: Fists Of Vengeance*, however, seeks to resolve this predicament with more than just an idle reprise. It suggests a level of developer commitment and publisher investment that might just be enough to artistically and mechanically shock the genre back into some form of life. The latest code reveals much that's been encouraged to evolve since the olden days, but much else, importantly, that remains unchanged.

A hybrid fighting RPG, *Beat Down* continues to avoid exploiting vacuous concepts such as mainstream urban culture, overt brutality or other modern clichés, instead revisiting the trash-talking vibrant underworld of more enigmatic times. Furthermore, it continues to recognise that elusive beat 'em up charm lies not solely in the delivery of a tacky voiceover and story, but in the coupling of those quirks with genuinely creative art and otherwise magnetic design. In its fictitious world of Las Sombras, then, we find a vivid cast of preposterously named and dressed characters inhabiting a more believably seedy network of locations, decorated with all manner of underworld flavours.

The game's environment is threatening but never fearsome, solemn but never dull – the kind of fairground dystopia that, once again, had long seemed discarded by these po-faced times. *Beat Down* recaptures and reinvents this domain, expanding it into wide patterns of streets rather than the usual linear hallways decked with urban wallpaper. By zoning its map into local turfs, it creates arenas initially reminiscent of *Spikeout*, but gifted with a depth that quickly makes the comparison redundant.

Between its one-on-one scraps and miniature battle royals (the latter allowing freedom of movement, the former locking its combatants together) the game is one of exploration, recruitment, domination and distractions, encouraging you to wrestle turfs from their resident gangs while building up your own entourage of available allies. The supporting cast is enormous, providing a wide array of male and female brawlers that, via interaction trees and sporadic bouts of brawling, can be intimidated, bribed or sometimes just convinced to provide information, assistance or currency. Killing people outright is another option, though it's rarely recommended. Your notoriety with the police and with other characters is recorded, occasionally requiring you to seek alternative costumes and even plastic surgery to blend you back into the crowd. While *Beat Down* rests upon a basic, though upgradeable fighting experience, the singleminded saga that it spins is seldom short of surprises.

Still, there's a concern, and it's an obvious one. That *Beat Down* is an inventive, encouraging scrolling fighter unfortunately makes it no less susceptible to that genre's inescapable pitfalls. For all its tricks and innovative diversions, it's possible that your enthusiasm for the game won't so much deflate as burst, since its repetitive conventions are quite capable of puncturing the appeal for those who remain unbitten by its old-school bug, and also those for whom that simple thrill no longer holds much sway.



In keeping with its overall flavour, *Beat Down*'s line-up of manoeuvres consistently connect with enormous weight, twisting and arching bodies wildly into walls and to the ground, often sending clots of ambiguous gristle into the air







Once recruited, local thugs and brawlers can be called upon via a black list of profiles. Rather than appear magically alongside you, they'll propose a meeting at a distant corner or landmark and await your arrival





The game owes much of its vivid design to its developer's work with the *Resident Evil: Outbreak* games and *Devil May Cry 3*, the environments' crisp and varied texturing proving to be an immediately recognisable signature



Clock the police

Beat Down's story deals heavily in corruption, and so features heavily that (allegedly) most crooked of western institutions: the law. The constabulary of Las Sombras is appropriately filthy, readily flinging you behind bars if your reputation warrants it, and if you fail to cough up the ever-increasing bribe demands. It's here where the game needs the most work if it's to avoid falling quickly foul of repetition, the process by which you wind up in, and then fight your way out of, jail being a laborious and carbon-copied haul. You can, of course, dodge this eventuality by either altering your appearance or beating seven bells out of arresting officers, but while one tactic can prove costly and sometimes inconsequential, the other is far from a routine achievement.





The series' customarily lavish hyper-Renaissance visuals are noticeably sharper than Namco's recent visual coup on the PS2 with *Tekken 5*, even coaxing greys out of the hardware that are crisply sombre rather than murkily indistinct



FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **NAMCO**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**

Soul Calibur III

Not to be outdone by Tekken 5, Namco's other prize fighter takes an open casting call for the stage of history

Soul Calibur series producer **Hiroaki Yotoriyama** is explaining the challenges facing his latest project – a tight development schedule necessitating a (single-) console focus and a race to keep its head above the next-gen hype swell – not by way of apology, but to impress on us his team's achievement. The resulting game isn't a *Soul Calibur II.V*, no less lavish yet no more progressive, but a game with a nearly overwhelming generosity of play modes. "I'm eager to find out how fans will react," Yotoriyama says, "for them to think about why we've made these modes. I think the series has the potential to expand into new areas of gaming."

Such future potential may be indicated in Chronicles Of The Sword mode, a turn-based strategy wargame where unit conflicts are resolved with one-on-one duels, or in the Soul Arena, a series of quickfire, gimmick-driven versus matches to contrast the military precision of standard twoplayer. Or perhaps it's in both modes, as *SCIII*'s breadth is not without direction: there's a noticeable theme of handing the reins over to the player, even allowing you to direct your chosen *Calibur* hero's destiny in the Tales Of Souls multiple-choice, multiple-ending story mode. "At this point, the game experience shouldn't be linear. We should allow players to always be asking questions: maybe if I did this, how about if I do that?" says Yotoriyama.

Career players' terrifying brains can compute those possibilities in a simulated world tournament ladder against AI opponents, but beginners and veterans alike should find *SCIII*'s character-creation mode attractive. Sixteen separate, layerable accessory locations go far beyond previous customisation efforts, although height and build are fixed to minimise game balance issues. Mechanically, the system is equally impressive: custom fighters will not borrow existing characters' moves, instead drawing on one of six professions (fixed at creation) and selectable weapon disciplines. "The team in charge of character creation has become so involved with it that they're worried it will have more impact than the existing characters," Yotoriyama reveals. "But I think both will live together."

Some of this codependence is forced, as many of the accessories, fighting disciplines and even basic professions must be unlocke[d] over the course of play – creating that truly ideal character may take a little warm-up time. Even so, it's possibly a watershed evolution for a high-profile, character-drive[n] eastern fighting game to encourage player individuality beyond costume selection. We put to Yotoriyama that he might be starting his genre's next generation a little early, and he grins. "It's not really a question of hardware – what's more important than playing to hardware specifications is delivering the kind of experience your players want. That's what we've learned with *SCIII*, and I'm confident we've achieved it."



Go west

In its concession to player-designed characters, *SCIII* seems to have incorporated a more meaningful western design cue without compromising its own vision. "*Soul Calibur* is a series that's very popular in the west, so we're constantly looking at other games – not just fighting games, but games in general – and asking what elements have given them western success," agrees Yotoriyama. "I tell my team I want them to be proactive in taking in these elements and incorporating them into our design – that's indeed what happened with the character-creation mode."



Player-created characters are free to fight against official characters in versus matches, but are also given their own story mode in the Chronicles Of The Sword action-wargame





While a custom character's clothes and armour – or lack thereof – have no effect on in-game mechanics, the choice of accessories and colour scheme does determine their personality traits for poses and taunts



Additional explosive environment damage has been added to the game's ground slams, ring-outs and wall strikes – it's perhaps a little overdone considering *Soul Calibur*'s otherwise high-class aesthetic, but then those neon blade trails are hardly reserved either



FORMAT: **PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **BUENA VISTA**
DEVELOPER: **CAPCOM**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **OCTOBER**

Tim Burton's The Nightmare Before Christmas: Oogie's Revenge

Not so much a generic licence as a case of Devil May Sing, as Capcom fleshes out Jack's skeleton with a game of Musical Bosses

It's a Christmas that's come a year later than expected but, then again, it's hardly unexpected for a Capcom action game. That's *action*, by the way, not a platforming-based exploration of minigames and limited combat, but instead fixed camera angles, strong and weak attack moves, a combo meter, counters and dodges. Spindly protagonist Jack Skellington wields a gooey weapon, a squelching, luminescent whip whose use isn't too far removed from *God Of War*'s chain-swords. As well as lashing enemies from a distance, Skellington can snatch them up, spin them round for crowd-wide damage, or just flick them across the screen. A dodge and a cumbersome counter – activated by rotating the left stick, then pressing a button – don't feel as slick as is necessary in similar action games.

Still, it's a game that surprises in its style of play, even if it's a format so well trodden that it doesn't come across as fresh. The licence's musical aspect is exploited colourfully within certain boss battles, where the whipping and cartwheels take a backseat to lyrical rhythm-action sections whose choruses can cause damage beyond foot-tapping infection. Skellington's repertoire goes further still with a pair of alternative costumes, a Halloween and Santa suit, the former offering the gift of fire and the latter capable of firing gifts, both of which can be flicked between as the situation demands. Still, while there's fidelity here in terms of the game's licence, the present build doesn't feel so much shallow – as is often the case with such a videogame spin-off – as not quite up to scratch.



Jack's goal is to reclaim Halloweentown from his former friend, and now nemesis, Oogie Boogie by visiting the worlds of other 'holidays' – Easter, Valentine's day, Thanksgiving, etc





The game's Capcom roots travel deep enough for it to offer *Devil May Cry*-style grades at the end of each chapter, with rewards for those who achieve A-ranks or higher. A soundbite attached to one of Jack's basic attacks – the Soul Robber – and spoken with its every use will become a huge irritation for players if it makes it to the finished code

Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six: Lockdown

Can an ambitious multiplayer mode turn this troubled tactical shooter into mission more-or-less accomplished?

FORMAT: **GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **RED STORM**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **SEPTEMBER**

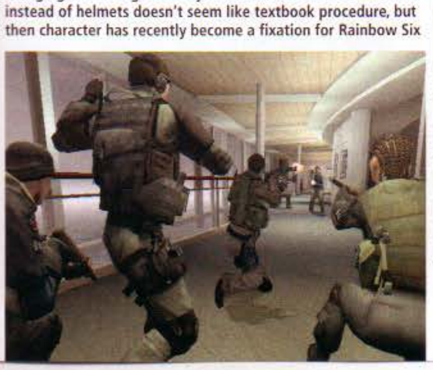
As much as people air concern over whether EA will one day acquire – and maybe assimilate – Ubisoft, another pressing question is whether anyone would notice. Together with the upcoming *Prince Of Persia: Kindred Blades*, the *Rainbow Six* series is at the heart of claims that the publisher is slipping into a familiar business model that champions regular updates to a cluster of bankable franchises.

The heavy delays experienced by *Lockdown*, the series' fourth instalment, make this a difficult accusation to prove outright, Red Storm's insistence on resolving bug issues and fleshing out its experience pushing the title's release closer to the advent of Xbox 360, and closer to a situation where consumers' minds (and wallets) become distracted by the allure of the developer's more promising Clancy operation, *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*.

Considering its new engine and new HUD (a visor that provides visual feedback such as cracks and bulletholes), *Lockdown* doesn't immediately instil confidence. Its honed and intuitive squad-command interface still failing to give adequate control over precisely how your team will position themselves once assigned a destination, the overall flow of missions feels more arcadey than before, and not to the game's benefit. Sniper missions, where you're charged with the long-range defence of your advancing squad, are decent slices of entertainment, but the feeling of inappropriateness is tangible. There's good news in the improvement of team AI, but the erratic behaviour of enemy units still suggests a job far from finished.

However, from the perspective that the *Rainbow Six* series (for Xbox, at least) has set itself up as more of a multiplayer exercise than a solo campaign – something suggested by the last game's *Black Arrow* expansion – then the outlook seems more optimistic. The Persistent Elite Creation mode – an online career with equipment and appearance changes – stands to be greeted by rapturous applause so long as the game's matching systems can ensure that play remains balanced. If *Rainbow Six: Lockdown* must prove itself a game built on a desire for evolution rather than an excuse for exploitation, then here it at least offers supporting, if not conclusive, evidence.

Charging into a siege like a lynchmob tooled with cornrows instead of helmets doesn't seem like textbook procedure, but then character has recently become a fixation for Rainbow Six









The new visor HUD allows for a variety of feedback effects, reflecting environments while providing visual alerts during times of extreme danger. Sadly, the more garish effects tend to do more harm than good

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **MIDWAY**
DEVELOPER: **STAINLESS STEEL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q4 2005**

Rise & Fall: Civilizations At War

An RTS in which Cleopatra bathes more in the blood of her enemies than the milk of their asses





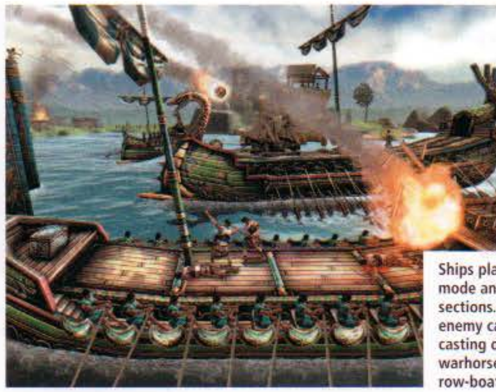


Pitched battles are impressive sights, but there's nothing yet to indicate any fresh or surprising depth to the combat, beyond the scissors-paper-stone of setting superior troops against vulnerable foes. Hopefully, the process of managing resources and exploiting the local geography will deepen the challenge

Rise & Fall thinks it knows what its USP is. The back of its box will proclaim that this is a detailed and demanding historical RTS that lets you zoom to the level of an individual leader, and take a direct, active role in the course of battle – slicing heads, firing arrows and calling in artillery fire with one imperious wave of your mouse. And structurally, of course, it's right. The introduction of a thirdperson action game mechanic to the RTS recipe provides a still unusual mix of styles.

Yet this isn't what hits you when you play the game. The punch *Rise & Fall* packs is almost entirely visual – not in the tiny detail and enormous scale that players are coming to take for granted in such historical epics, but in the colours. Colours games hardly ever get to use, and that many gaming PCs have never been asked to produce – regal purples and bottomless turquoises, tangerine, carnelian and lilac. In a genre dominated by sand, stone and skin it's a riotous relief.

But alongside its initial impact, the game still has some questions to answer. A short playtest wasn't enough to gauge the depths of the strategic challenge on offer, but it's clear that the interface will need to go through some revision before it can present the kind of unobtrusive but accessible presentation a game of this complexity needs. It's possible to take advantage of the thirdperson mode whenever desired – although only for strictly limited time periods – but the novelty isn't enough to disguise that its implementation is fairly basic and limited. However, the game also includes specifically designed action levels which make up for what's lacking in control with scope, spectacle and impressively dynamic pacing. And ultimately, even if *Rise & Fall*'s contrasting play styles don't gel into a single, satisfying whole, they still point encouragingly to ways in which the historical RTS can evolve toward a more vibrant future.





Ships play a major role within the game, both in strategy mode and during the granduer of the set-piece action sections. Used for transporting troops, it's possible for enemy cavalry to scramble on board if you're tardy in casting off. The carnage that results from trapping six warhorses on the deck of what is fundamentally a large row-boat is a horrifying but strangely compelling sight

Tony Tough 2: A Rake's Progress

Why point and click when you can poke and pry? Especially when what you're poking is a talkative Italian

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **DTP ENTERTAINMENT**
DEVELOPER: **PROGRAPH RESEARCH**
ORIGIN: **ITALY**
RELEASE: **AUTUMN 2005**

Despite the cartoony nature of the main characters, and the implausibility of some of his adventures, Tony Tough's world has a solidity and realism that many more elaborate games have failed to match

Handy things, children. For those with the laudable intention of injecting more mature sophistication into the videogames they make, the innocence and unpredictability of a child can provide a fantastic foil for darker storylines and riskier jokes – whether it's the sunny subtleties of *Animal Crossing*, the grisly innuendoes of *Gregory Horror Show* or now the smart-talking sarcasm of the young Tony Tough. A prequel to the fondly received old-school adventure *The Night Of The Roasted Moths*, *A Rake's Progress* takes the charmingly unlovable private eye Tony Tough back to his 1950s childhood. Set in the small town of Washington, New Mexico, the plot takes in the area's older native history as well as the newer fuss and folklore surrounding the purported Roswell UFO crash. It's a rich mix, and one which is well served by the game's visual style – the pale dust and warm sun settling in a haze around the careful, muted details of Washington's wood buildings and dry-baked yards. Tough himself is stylistically unrecognisable from the 2D future that the first game painted for him in thick, cartoony colours, although it's possible to identify the embryonic traits and habits that formed the core of that game's humour.

As a child, he turns out to have been just as cutting, raising an already sky-high eyebrow at all aspects of his adventure, whether the dull-headedness of the people he meets, his own ill-thought-out actions or your choices as a player. The writing is deft and artful – although a little idiosyncratically translated for now, and yet to be voiced – enlivening what is otherwise an absolutely classical point'n'click adventure game. There's little doubt that it's an outmoded mechanic, but the title's two creators keep the sense of place tight enough, and the range of 'use this on that' options manageable enough that your attention stays focused on the story and the humour rather than exhausting your list of verb/noun combinations. It may be the kind of game whose moment has passed, but *A Rake's Progress* looks like it may be a title which makes it hard to remember just why that is.



At the moment the translation of the dialogue is patchy, but hopefully the finished version won't lose all the flourish and inventiveness of the original and often very colourful Italian text



Metropolis



"Project Gotham Racing wasn't our ideal name, but people have got to know it, so it's what it'll always be," says **Martyn Chudley**, managing director of Liverpool-based studio Bizarre Creations. It was coined by Microsoft after the team added New York to the cities offered in *Metropolis Street Racer*, and it's a tongue-in-cheek nickname that stuck. But it hasn't stuck for the members of the team: for them *PGR3* will always be called something else, as Chudley explains: "The internal project name is Amax – because amaxophobia is the fear of being in cars." It seems an odd choice, until you understand that it's a gag which sums up everything that *PGR3* is trying to capture: this isn't just a driving sim, or an arcade racer. This is a game about *loving* being in cars.

Project Gotham Racing began as an Xbox launch title, an evolved offshoot of the aforementioned Dreamcast game. Two *PGRs* later – and with a third in the pipeline for Xbox 360's launch window – it's gone from codename to watchword, a symbol of the series' winning blend of accessible handling, pristine and faithful vehicle models, real-world city backdrops and an engaging game structure. *PGR* games have been hardcore car porn that didn't need to repel the softcore in order to make their name, and it's a name that Bizarre has built a worldwide reputation upon.

now

Bizarre Creations' next-gen racing opus PGR3 has gone from nought to 360. Now, it's all about how to take one step backwards in order to take two steps forward...



TITLE: **PROJECT GOTHAM RACING 3**
FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT**
DEVELOPER: **BIZARRE CREATIONS**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **TBC**







The Ferrari 430 will be *PGR3*'s star, although it may not be the ultimate reward. Of the game's 80-strong line-up, just ten are locked away from the beginning, allowing players to choose and purchase a favourite and stick with it

Or, as Chudley puts it: "*Forza* and *Gran Turismo 4* have the simulation side of things nicely wrapped up. You've got *Burnout* and *Need For Speed* taking the arcade route, and we're somewhere in the middle. We may not like being in the middle, but that's our niche. We treat it as a serious arcade game as opposed to a frivolous sim."

PGR3 ushers in a major change for the series, one that revolves around its vehicles. Thinking small in order to think big, *PGR3*'s car list has jettisoned the low-power vehicles present in previous *Gothams* in order to focus purely on the coveted superstar monsters that often form the ultimate rewards in real-world racing games. It's a garage that's 80 cars wide, and is the basis for *PGR3*'s motto: 'Life begins at 170'.

That tagline didn't come first, however. "It encapsulated what supercars were all about. You wouldn't look at a Radical as a supercar, but it does still have the same kind of ethos as what we're trying to attack. It's our cut-off point, our focus," says Chudley. "One of the first things we looked at was the vehicle set – what type of car is going to be a next-gen type o car? Supercars summed it up completely. The most glamorous desirable and the fastest; those you have as posters in your





bedroom. There are other games that do other car sets – there's *GT4*, which is genius, and *Forza*, which is Microsoft's attack on that kind of market. You've got *Need For Speed* and *Juiced* tackling the lower end of things, with their customisation aspects. So what segment of the market isn't being dealt with? We didn't want to do all of that market. If we did, and had included 700 cars, we couldn't have gone into the level of detail we really wanted, which takes around three months per car. We decided to fix on this very focused set in order to deliver the experience surrounding them to the nth level of detail."

Car categories were at the heart of *PGR2*'s career mode, breaking it up into chapters of challenges designed to be undertaken with a specific theme or power bracket in mind. So have distinctive car classes been abandoned entirely? "There are still classes. One of the things I was very keen on was there being no ultimate car, the be all and end all. I wanted all the cars to have rivals, so you don't just go into a particular event, as in *Gotham 2*, pick the vehicle with the most stats, and ace every single race. With *PGR3*, you can play how you want. We wanted to make the game accessible, so anyone could play." Nevertheless, there will be a cover star taking pride of place on the game's box – the Ferrari 430.

"We've got 80 cars, 70 of which are available from the off for purchase with cash earned in the game. OK, we've provided progression for the people that want progression, but the people who just want to race online in Saleens – bang – there it is. In *MSR*'s multiplayer we only let you race cars you'd won in the singleplayer campaign! What were we thinking? So the whole career mode has changed in its emphasis. The events modify themselves based on the vehicle you're in. So if you want to play the whole game – the whole of the career mode – in just one car, you can do it. And you're not going to get penalised in any way. It's just trying to be fair to the user."

It's this approach that could well be the most truly next-gen progression in the next-gen, not waxing high definition, not unified online and media functions, but mixing ground-level approachability with ripe challenge. It's perhaps a little intimidating to have to tackle this new offering in *PGR3*'s super-only vehicles without the learning curve of less powerful cars, but Bizarre Creations' accessibility-centred philosophy for the game will be realised through a handful of new play modes that can't yet be revealed. With some three million *Project Gotham* games sold to date, has the series' accessibility really been a problem? It doesn't appear to be an oft-mouthed criticism. "Racing games have to provide a certain challenge, but I didn't want to have too many blockers – even *Forza* is guilty of it, and we were massively guilty of it in *Gotham 2*. If you wanted to race the Nürburgring, you'd first have to go and race this track and that track and so on. In *PGR*, we said, 'Here is the ultimate car – the F50', and you've got to do this and that and, 30 hours later, you'd win the car, and couldn't do jack shit with it. We looked at how people played the singleplayer mode in *PGR2*, and how their interest would suddenly trail off. Everybody played the first chapter, and then you get a drop-off for the second, and it was quite ludicrous the amount of stuff we'd put in and not everyone was not seeing." Based on statistics gathered by Bizarre regarding the progress of online players, this tendency was backed up with a harsh observation: around 70 per cent of players halted their progress after the third chapter of the 14 present in the offline career mode.

Other, slight pieces of slimming are taking place, too. The menus have stripped down their language, and upped their boldness. The traditional Time Attack, for example, is now known as the more plain-speaking Race Against The Clock. But there are still refinements and additions in other pivotal areas, such as the new Time vs Kudos mode. The lap timer stops whenever the player is earning kudos – *Gotham*'s currency of reward for stylish and overblown play. And the kudos categories have been expanded significantly, breaking down the powerslide into a handful of different types – over

"One thing I was very keen on was there being no ultimate car, the be all and end all. I wanted all the cars to have rivals"

Sound stretchers



***PGR3*'s three-man audio team lives in a small room with lots of speakers, and heads that echo with the engines of the past two *Project Gotham* titles. Things have shifted up a suitable gear for *PGR3*, and every noisy component of a vehicle's anatomy has had a microphone strapped to it – at up to 30 locations per car – to sample every exhaust and engine induction point, an effort that allows these channels to be interlaced in a way that reflects the true sound of the car within the gameworld, and the player's position within that car. The density and proximity of buildings will be reflected in the vehicle's audio, and each wheel has been modelled independently to give those who drive with the in-car view some feedback as to just what surface and level of slippage each wheel is experiencing. It's a feature that, from feedback from the rest of the team, is claimed to shave significant seconds off lap times, too. The point is pushed home with a demo of a TVR zipping by a fixed camera, as the room itself is turned up to 11, and it's all there in one staggering whoosh – whining supercharger, juddering exhaust and growling engine, all combined into one terrifying, reverential noise. It's either the sound of passion or overkill – delete as applicable – and one that'll be best appreciated by those with surround-sound systems who aren't afraid to use them.**



The increase in detail within the game's locations isn't so much noticeable thanks to superior textures, but due to the sheer numbers of buildings that make up the backdrop of the tracks. New York, in particular, shows off this intricacy

Tom and Jerry

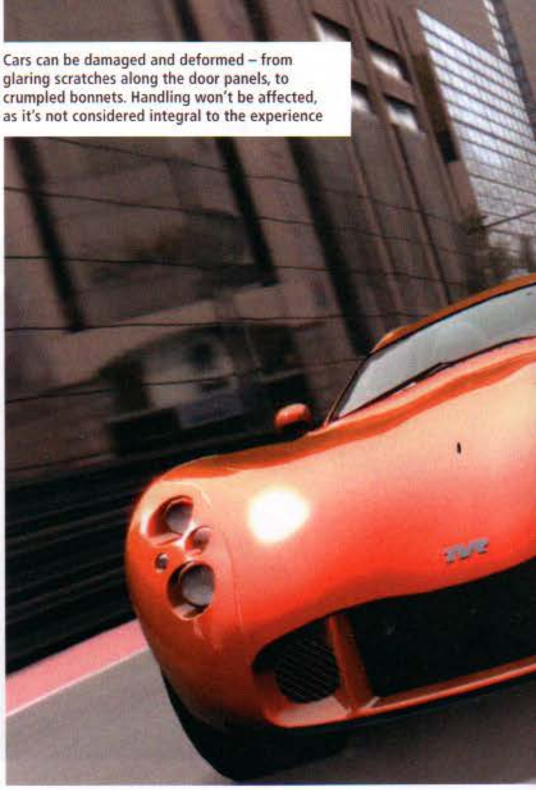


So, what of Cat and Mouse, the unofficial online mode that emerged from *Project Gotham Racing 2* as players split into pairs and used top-class vehicles to shunt Minis across the finish line in the fastest time? *PGR3* offers Red vs Blue team races, but its focused car selection does make the reappearance of this multiplayer favourite seem very unlikely. "Cat and Mouse wasn't part of the core of the game," says Chudley, "but people really enjoyed it and it's fun. But it wasn't part of what the game was setting out to do. We looked at that as a blip, basically; what most people do is just go for the top two or three car classes, so all the time and effort – the focus, the polish that we put into those other cars – wasn't really wasted per se, but could have been rechannelled. So instead of having those 15 cars that people really use, why not try to produce a shitload more that people will use all the time?"

slides, braking slides, feints – among others. Winning races reaps cash, not kudos, which is used to purchase cars whose prices reflect their real-world worth.

Xbox Live, in line with Microsoft's vision for 360, is a key part of this experience, too, thanks to the Gotham TV mode in the game. This will be present whenever you're connected online in the game, keeping you up to speed with what else is happening in the community. "The presentation and the interface are wrapped up in Gotham TV," explains Chudley, "and it's something that's being put across in human terms, something recognisable and sectioned. I keep on likening it to a TIVO, the most complicated thing known to man, but wrapped up in an interface that my dad can use. We've got very big, bold presentation, nothing anal or simmy. It's sports TV, something people can relate to, and it's the ethos for the whole game.

"We felt that *Gotham 2* had a community, but it was very fragmented and restricted to lobbies, but now we have things like Gotham Heroes, and a ticker than runs along the bottom of the screen to let you now what's going on in the community. But it won't bother you while racing. These stories are interactive, too, and can be clicked on for you to watch, to make you feel like part of the global sprawl, and part of a bigger community. With Xbox 360, we wanted *Gotham* games to stop being so desolate, too. In previous games, it was like races were taking place in a city that had just been neutron-bombed to hell. With Gotham TV, everyone is watching you, which implies that it's a real sport. It's something we've really taken to heart. You feel and see the crowd, hear them cheering from their proper grandstands."

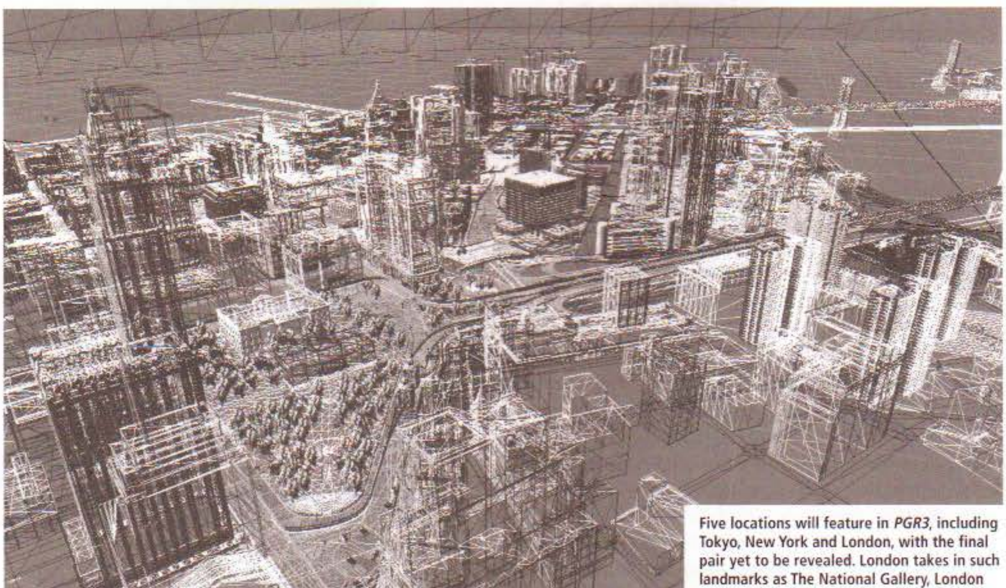


Cars can be damaged and deformed – from glaring scratches along the door panels, to crumpled bonnets. Handling won't be affected, as it's not considered integral to the experience

density of the crowd is dependent on your Live reputation, too, with thick mobs of people turning out to witness a star player. In line with the family-centric culture that J Allard has in mind for Xbox 360, can a player's friends and families scan in themselves in so that their likenesses appear at trackside? "No. We're a racing game, not My Little Pony or anything like

"We wanted Gotham to stop being so desolate. In previous games, it was like races were in a city that had been bombed"

These virtual crowds are tailored to fit to each city, and are all too willing to respond to the on-track races. Half-a-dozen different reactions are in place solely for the event of a car veering too close to the crowd or crashing into a nearby barrier. They lean out to watch vehicles pass, will boo and jeer at anyone driving badly and applaud slick manoeuvres. The

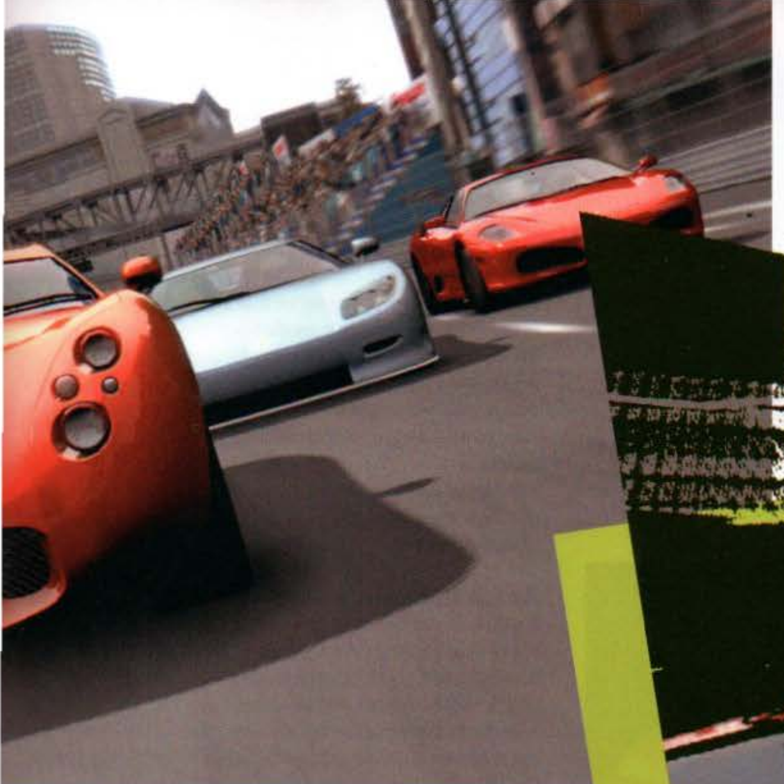


Five locations will feature in *PGR3*, including Tokyo, New York and London, with the final pair yet to be revealed. London takes in such landmarks as The National Gallery, London Eye, Westminster Abbey and Piccadilly Circus

that. There are certain things that go with our ethos, and there are things that don't. The whole sportification of it seemed to be a natural progression. You have all these virtual people watching you at the track, and Live TV presenting it globally to real players. The new hardware's given us that extra oomph; we would've loved to have people in *MSR*, but we felt it was more important to concentrate on the vehicles and the environments. Now we've got enough time to deal with the ambience as well as the surroundings of the race tracks."

When the game is viewed through *PGR3*'s new in-car perspective, it feels like a new and heightened experience that remains as much of a rush as *Project Gotham Racing* has ever been, without bringing play to a simulation-clogged, overly demanding halt. It's furnished with the kind of detail that's been traditionally lavished on car skins and the recreation of city streets; motion capture down to the driver's finger bones, and meticulously realised dashboards with functioning dials. The detail feels fantastic. "No, it's not fantastic, it's insane," corrects Chudley. It's a far from serious statement, but hints at the truth of the effort invested into the game. "We don't make things easy for ourselves," adds one of the New York art team, as the map of the titular Gotham is showcased. It's been worked on for some 18 months, and required twice as many sourced photographs as a typical *PGR2* city; digital cameras were used this time around, giving artists far more freedom to harvest snapshots than the previous endeavour of using rolls of film.

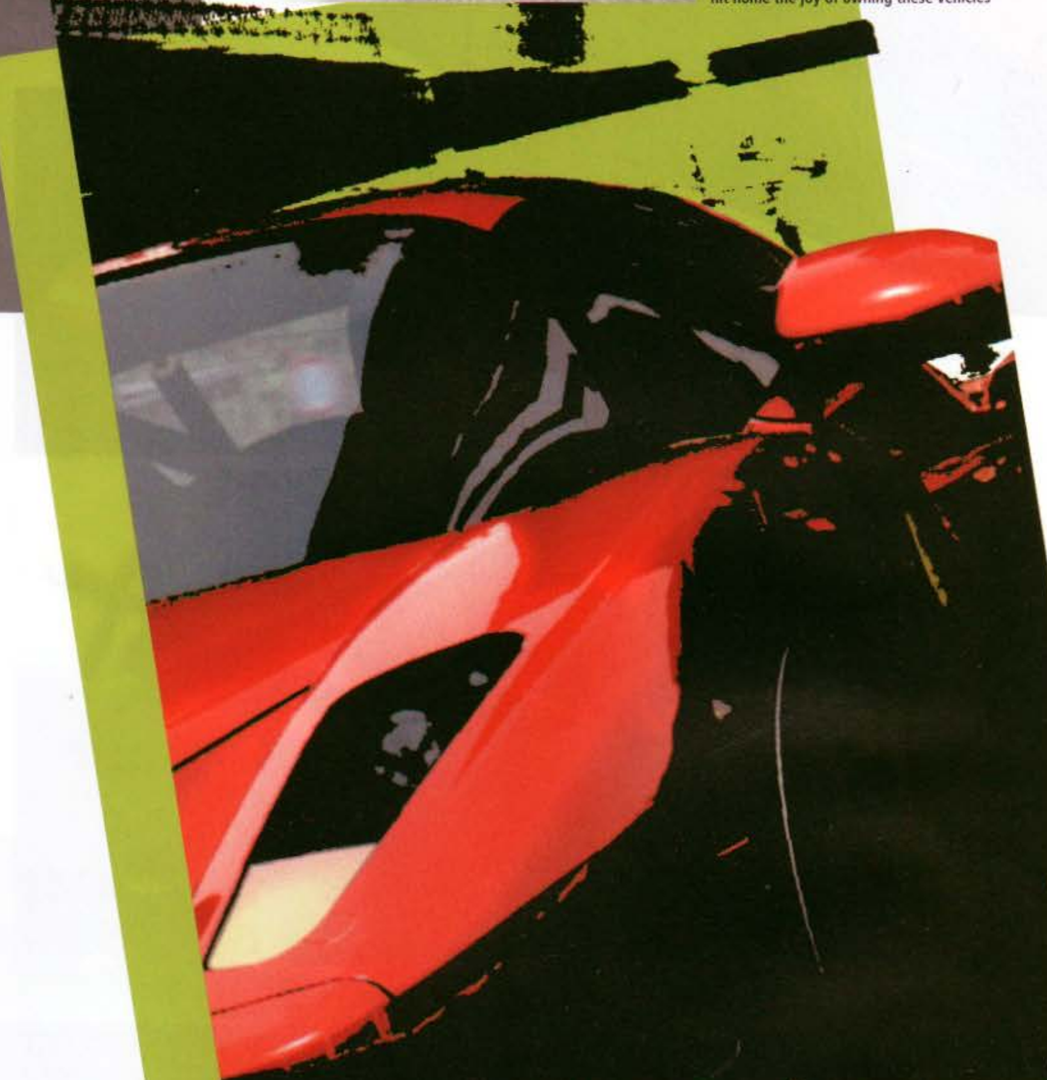
But back to the virtual New York. To perhaps balance out *PGR3*'s attempts at providing a streamlined and sleek



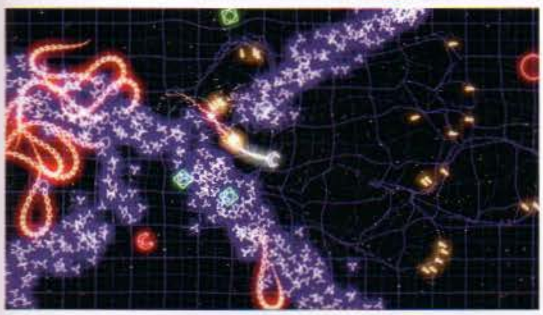




Interior detail is extravagant, serving to hit home the joy of owning these vehicles







Geometry Wars returns, subtitled *Retro Evolved*. It currently takes place on a blue grid, which warps and melts beautifully once things get busy, and the game starts to throw around more colours and particles than makes sense

experience, and one deceptive of its complexity, here are a handful of dry details regarding Bizarre Creations' sim cities: road textures are composed of four separate layers – one of the tarmac texture itself, two of modulation to break up the surface and add cracks and dirt, with a final application of markings, of white and yellow lines. Car exteriors and interiors are built from 40,000 polygons each. New York's Brooklyn and Manhattan bridges are formed from 600,000 and one million triangles, respectively. For reference, one of *Metropolis Street Racer*'s Tokyo tracks took up just 90,000 in its entirety.

Each bridge is around one-and-a-half kilometres long, and both form a set of speedy strips that link up some of the circuits staged across Brooklyn and Lower Manhattan. They're more than just breakneck havens for playing chicken with some terminating bends, however – they're also a visual centrepiece. The Manhattan bridge has three lanes atop an



With cars and cities requiring so many resources in their construction, it's unclear whether or not Bizarre will offer *PGR2*-style booster packs over Live



elevated road, is flanked by subway trains, and is a terrific, intricate criss-cross of wires, railings and cables. And visible through that tangle of industrial webbing is the city itself, a backdrop of urban density that stretches on as far as tourists can see. It's the grey of it all that's striking, and not in the traditional sense of washed-out pseudo-realism in games, but in just how faithfully and vividly the typically greyscaled colourscheme of a large city is captured. If there was ever a time to use that traditionally dull shade as a compliment, it's here. Such sweeping views are far from unique, too; another of the cities – that can't yet be revealed – has a draw distance that stretches the three-kilometre length of one of its circuits, taking in the courtyards and driveways of its buildings.

As for framerate, Bizarre Creations is aiming for 60fps, but cannot commit to anything as the game is some way from being finished. Regardless, a demo of the most recent build shows a game that's glossy and nigh-on intimidating with detail, foxy bodywork and an in-car view that appears to be everything that Chudley has wished: "One of the things I was massively keen on was not just building the exteriors, but also the interiors. I wanted the car ownership to be part of it – I now *own* this Enzo, and when I'm driving it, it's a totally different experience to the TVR Sagaris. And it's experiences that few can have in reality so we wanted to get as close as we possibly could to that sort of car set, the supercars and tracks that almost everyone seemed to go for."

PGR's handling models have always specialised in being enjoyable mixtures of reality and unreality – precise, and with strong feedback and character for each vehicle, but loose enough for players to be able to drive with flair – is this an issue for any of the car manufacturers? The aforementioned Sagaris, for example, doesn't have ABS – does TVR demand that the handling has to reflect this compared to other *PGR3* cars? "The manufacturers are keen that their cars are portrayed correctly visually, with strict model and texture approvals, and in terms of safety – such as not crushing the cockpit – but they don't seem that concerned in the area of handling and driveability. I think they appreciate that as





The route editor allows players to quickly and simply define their own tracks within each city, for racing offline and over Live. Start points are fixed, and junctions are selected to create a point-to-point or lap-based race. Random generation can join the dots automatically, and provide millions of prospective combinations



As if to prove some kind of point, the entire *PGR3* team filed out for this photo with little fuss. Managing director Martyn Chudley appears at the front, far right, next to wife Sarah, Bizarre Creations' commercial director



In line with Microsoft's format-wide 'achievements' scheme for Xbox 360, *PGR3* features numerous badges and cups for players to earn and brandish in their online profile. These vary from simple race goals to grand, swaggering honours

realistic as a game may become, it just can't reproduce 100 per cent of the real-life driving experience."

And what about the online driving experience? It's especially pertinent considering that Bizarre is planning to run regular *PGR3* tournaments that will accommodate up to several thousand players. Are there any plans or rules in place regarding griefing and cheating? "Actual hacking of our content will be much harder in *PGR3*," says Chudley, as much a challenge as a warning to some. "The security system on the 360 itself will be much tighter this time around. I think Microsoft has learnt a lot about security from Xbox. With regards to game exploits, we will be taking measures to fix the issues that have come up in *PGR2* and we will have the facility to ban players from Live play altogether. This is an initiative Microsoft Game Studios is keen to make a standard for all their firstparty titles. When it comes to players being aggressive and abusive during races, there's obviously a feedback system built into the new version of Live. This means a player that consistently gets bad feedback will start to get matched with other players of similar feedback so they can be bad players together." And with that, it sounds like Gotham TV has already found one of its most interesting channels.

bizarreonline.net have whipped up a wealth of debate about their plausibility – real-world photograph or in-game screenshot? Does the appearance of this question bring worries about the levels of realism aimed for *PGR3*, in terms of where this aspect of the game can go next? Will it even be possible, say, for *PGR10* to exist? "Every time we make a game," answers Chudley, "it's always 50-75 per cent of what we wanted it to be in terms of gameplay, and 70-90 per cent of what we want it to be in terms of polish. In particular, there is lots of multiplayer and online content that we just don't have the time for, and plenty of game ideas and modes that came along too late to make it to the design. I don't know if they'll last until *PGR10*, but there's enough in the ideas bucket to make a whole new game or two."

And how has Xbox 360 fared as a development platform? "It's not as easy to get to grips with as the Xbox, but it has an enormous amount of 'hidden' depths and power – only a fraction of which we've already been able to tap. This is the ideal scenario – the first wave of titles will look good because of the straight-out-of-the-box power, but there's plenty more to discover to make subsequent waves of games even better."

But there's something not yet discussed that is, for some

"The first wave of titles will look good because of the straight-out-of-the-box power, but there's plenty more to discover"

Regardless, *PGR3* has already been online for quite some time, in a wholly different kind of arena: Bizarre Creations' community website. Its studio diary has caused quite a stir with its dripfeed of detail and screenshots, but that's only partly due to the content itself. Past *Project Gotham* games, perhaps through good timing as much as anything else, seem to be in the habit of courting prestige. *PGR* proved to be a powerful launch offering for Xbox, with its sequel being a spearhead for the second generation of Xbox titles, as well as perhaps the first true Xbox Live outing whose content and structure was anything close to the promise of Microsoft's online service. And now that E3's smoke grenade has cleared, *PGR3* has perhaps become the most visible of Xbox 360's first wave of software, a software statement of so much of what the machine is capable of and stands for, and one that's due for a thunderous scrutiny. As a portent, the shots released via

section of the *PGR* fan contingent, perhaps as important as any amount of lavish bodywork, horsepower-coveting or elaborate Live integration. Something that, perhaps unintentionally, is now part of the franchise, however peripheral: *Geometry Wars*. This simple but frantic 2D shooter could be found tucked away within *PGR2*, and proved to be a colourful distraction for downtime between races. Will there be a follow-up? "Oh... yes," whispers Chudley. "It's really weird. It's next-gen (laughs), a next-gen retrogame. The amount of particles in it is just insane. But, yeah, it's just part of the package, part of *Gotham*." This devotion to a pared-down, old-school bonus seems very much at odds with the rest of the *PGR* ethos, until you remember that nickname. If *PGR* is amaxophobia, this is ludophobia. Together, they should deliver something as appealing to people who love playing games as people who love being in cars.

Motorsupport



As far as moderately serious Xbox racing titles go, there are two obvious highlights: *PGR2* and *Forza Motorsport* (above), a pair of games that likely share fans the same way they share smooth and thoughtful difficulty curves. But the two have roots that travel deeper than that. Sarah Chudley, Bizarre Creations' commercial director, explains: "At Microsoft, the structure mirrors ours. So our programming lead has a counterpart at Microsoft, who is a trained programmer, someone who he communicates with, and who becomes his 'eyes and ears' at Microsoft. The same happens with art, audio, design, production, etc. At the end of development of the original *PGR*, many of these leads were looking for ways of being more involved in the game, and Microsoft was looking to start an internal team, and they were moved over to start the *Forza* team. We talk, as they're friends, but the teams no longer have a huge amount of conversation."





A photo mode is available, allowing players to pause an offline race at any moment, shift the camera around and snap away. It can then be modified using a number of filters, and is stored on the hard drive as an image for the player's use



APE ESCAPE

UBISOFT MONTPELLIER IS BREAKING FREE FROM TIE-IN TRADITION WITH AN AMBITIOUS TAKE ON PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG





As Driscoll, you have no hope of taking down the terrifying T-rexes directly, and can only flee, distracting or slowing them by any means you can find. Exacting revenge later as Kong is a rich reward for your risk

Tucked away in a quiet suburban street, away from the easygoing bustle of an ordinary Mediterranean city, the house that Rayman built is just that – a house. This is Ubisoft's Montpellier studio, enclave of the French giant's star creative **Michel Ancel** and his team: an old building with a peeling, sun-baked exterior and a dark interior of cool tiling and bare plaster, set in a small courtyard shaded by heavy-limbed plane trees. It's usually home to a core team of 30, but recruitment from every corner of Ubisoft's global development empire has swelled ranks to 70 as its current project enters its last six months. Conditions are cramped, but it still feels tranquil and homely.

Despite the overcrowding, one room remains unoccupied: a sanctum within a sanctum, and a shrine to concept art. A dense, kinetic tangle of sketched vines and painted monsters occupies every available inch of wall. Showing us round, Ancel says that the room has been a well of inspiration for everyone at the studio, from animators to sound designers. It also has a much larger twin – on the other side of the world, in the New Zealand offices of film effects company Weta Digital. It's the starting point, and is still the heart, of an unusual big-bucks collaboration between two stubbornly independent creators: *Peter Jackson's King Kong*.

The Kong publicity machine has been at pains to point out that the Kiwi director hand-picked Ancel's team to adapt his cherished movie remake after playing their last labour of love, *Beyond Good & Evil*. This, goes the line, was the informed choice of a passionate gamer, not the usual marriage of convenience between studio suits. It's easy to be sceptical, but if Ancel himself had any doubts, they were put to rest as soon as he met Jackson.

"When I met Peter Jackson at first I was quite stressed, of course. But then very quickly he said that he finished *BG&E*, and more than finishing it he appreciated some parts, even the end; he really had a

TITLE: **PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG**
FORMAT: **360, GC, PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE (MONTPELLIER)**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **NOVEMBER**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E151**



memory about important moments. It was really cool, in fact." As well as flattering the rangy Frenchman, Jackson's detailed comments on everything from the game's visual effects to its storytelling technique formed the common ground on which they started to build their ideas for the adaptation of Kong.

But *BG&E*'s cool reception at retail after four years' hard work had left Ancel in limbo – "when I finished it, I didn't know what to do directly," he confesses – and the prospect of basing a videogame on a modern cinematic myth rather than his own characters only baffled him further. "At first it was just questions in my mind: what could be the game behind King Kong?" He could only think of *Donkey Kong*, or some simplistic, destructive retread of *Rampage*. Jackson eventually wooed him with a setting that appealed to his sensibilities. "It's set early last century, so there is a good flavour that we really like... It's the kind of universe we would have been happy to create ourselves. The mix of fantastic creatures and good old explorers and adventure stories, like Indiana Jones. And real people, human emotions."

Was it, then, a meeting of minds, of kindred spirits? "I discovered, surprisingly, that in New Zealand the way they are working on the movie is very... artisanal," he says, which translates as 'craftsmanlike'. "It's more about art than commercial issues... we visited Weta and it was really like how we work here in Montpellier, very close collaboration, simple relationships." There's a clear sense of mutual respect ("We were like little kids to see those people," enthuses game designer **Sebastien Morin**, and the feeling was reciprocated), but despite bi-monthly sessions with director, scriptwriters and actors, there hasn't been much need for constant collaboration, says Ancel: "They did so much work that it spoke for itself without direct contact."





Jackson described Kong's relationship with Ann (top) to the developers as that of a seven-year-old boy with his favourite "puppet or toy or cat." Her growing trust in the monster will be the emotional core of both film and game





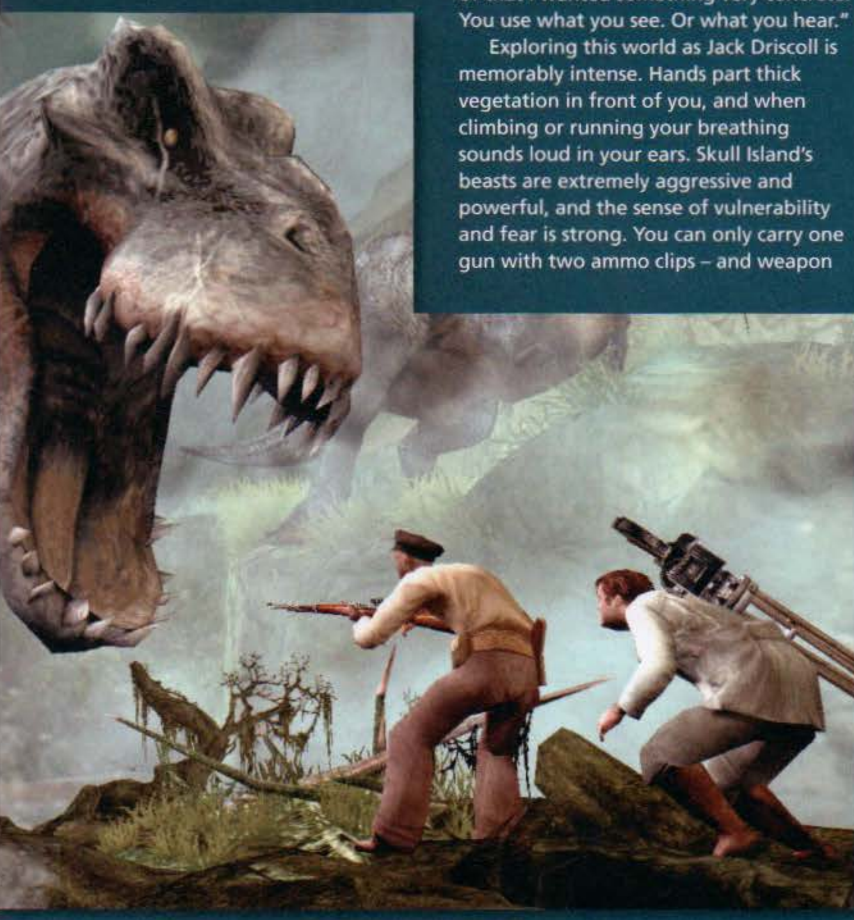
Game designer Sebastien Morin is working closely with Peter Jackson and New Zealand movie effects house Weta

A heartwarming tale, but the father of Rayman must feel some frustration serving as translator of another man's ideas, surely? He shrugs: "I've been working on *Rayman, Rayman 2, Beyond Good & Evil*, it was about eight years of creating characters and things like that... that's enough." Is there a tiny note of relief in his voice? Perhaps. But, thankfully, you don't have to take Ancel's word for it, because every aspect of *Peter Jackson's King Kong* tells you that the ambition and creative conviction of its makers are undimmed.

"I think that maybe it's easier, because you don't have everything to invent, and you are sure that it will be liked by a lot of people," says Morin. Liberated from these concerns, and fiercely focused on creating the best possible experience for the widest number of players, the Montpellier team has set itself an intimidating agenda. Two perspectives on two radically different play styles (firstperson survival as hero Jack Driscoll and thirdperson acrobatic carnage as King Kong); a complete removal of HUD-style readouts; an adaptive difficulty system to accommodate players of all abilities; a minimal reliance on cut-scenes; no inventory and realistic limits on weaponry; a convincing AI supporting cast; a high level of environmental interaction; varied, emergent action; and behind it all, a careful replication of the film's emotional arc (if not its exact plot).

Laudable aims, and at present the signs of success are more than encouraging. The Skull Island jungle setting is beautiful and richly atmospheric, choked with mist and streaked with low rays of watery sunlight. Above all, Ancel wanted to create a world and put players directly in it, and many of his brave decisions stem from that.

"You know, it's in 1933, I didn't want a HUD or things like that. It's very concrete. It's more about wild animals than technology. So I think it was good to use a very concrete feel because that's the spirit of the movie. I think survival is based on intimacy [with your surroundings]... you can touch things, danger can touch you, anything is important because you need resources and anything can help. Because of that I wanted something very concrete. You use what you see. Or what you hear."



Exploring this world as Jack Driscoll is memorably intense. Hands part thick vegetation in front of you, and when climbing or running your breathing sounds loud in your ears. Skull Island's beasts are extremely aggressive and powerful, and the sense of vulnerability and fear is strong. You can only carry one gun with two ammo clips – and weapon crates, to maintain consistency, are dropped sparsely by a friendly seaplane – so conserving ammo is crucial, but at any time you can pick up and throw the tribal spears and shards of bone that litter the island, or stab with them (although they will break). You can also fend predators off by setting fires or, most intriguingly, use the food chain to your advantage – luring them into attacking each other or distracting them with tasty morsels impaled on the end of a spear before sneaking by.

Tactical freedom and unscripted happenings are seen as vital by the team. Asked what mistakes he'd learned from the production of *Beyond Good & Evil*, Ancel cites the over-use of cut-scenes and scripted events. "We learned that it was better to let the player make his own story," and furthermore a story that wouldn't necessarily be the same as another players', or even the same as it was five minutes ago. So an unscripted, rules-based approach has been adopted almost across the board. But freedom, as ever, begets a tricky tightrope act for the designers. "It's always an issue of balance, and dominant strategies," confirms Morin. "The big issue at the beginning was to find the right balance between strategies that are easy to be done, like [mimes Tommy gun] ratatata, or planned strategies like luring some beast and

THE BACK OF BEYOND

The last time we spoke to Michel Ancel (below), just before *Beyond Good & Evil*'s ill-starred release, he seemed to envision a sequel or two for his iconoclastic comic-book adventure. He now denies any concrete plans were in place, but remains positive about the game despite its poor sales, and doesn't rule a continuation either in or out. "If we make a sequel to *BG&E*, it would have a lot of advantage because of the time we've spent on *King Kong*. It's not that much of a problem to do it. It seems that a lot of people would like a sequel, and I wrote the story to be longer, so it would be good to finish it. But we have no plans for that."







Manipulating Kong via a pad is a matter of pure animal instinct. The studio is still researching how best to implement mouse and keyboard

You can fend off predators by setting fires or, intriguingly, use the food chain to your advantage





Kong's in-game likeness is still subject to change, since Peter Jackson is constantly modifying the beast's filmic appearance in post-production. "It's very dynamic, like a jazz way of making films," says Ancel

setting a fire, so we have to find incentives for the player to do so."

Mention the ambitious attempt to strip away all screen clutter, and Ancel rolls his eyes. Has it given them headaches? "Yes, constantly. We need to give all the feedback to make sure that the player has the right information. So it's hard work, but I think we were in the right direction." It's impossible to disagree. Removing readouts simply brings the gameworld a step closer, makes it more tangible and credible, and having to rely on audio and visual cues (such as heart rate, spoken reload reminders, mounted gun sights and sickening red blurs when wounded) only intensifies the excitement.

Another bold move to bring player and game closer together, but one that's not possible to judge yet, is the automatic

T-Rexes present an opportunity to use Kong's charges, slams, punches and finishing moves

difficulty system. Intended to enable all players to reach the end of the *King Kong* story, it will be based simply on the number of times you die, and alter enemy parameters accordingly (making some easier to defeat, prompting some to attack each other and ignore you, or adding more), as well as offering "simpler, different approaches." It will go hand in hand with an achievement system for more skilled players that will recognise feats like a 100 per cent kill ratio or no companions wounded, and reward them by revealing new creatures or unlocking "a big gameplay feature." It's a





You can call out to your companions with a button press; depending on the situation, this might bring them to your aid, hurry them up, or make them throw a weapon to you



frustratingly vague scheme at present, and according to Morin, not as novel as you might think: "Some games managed to do that but it was quite hidden... like *Crash Bandicoot*. That's an old game but it was really well done." But it's still a very welcome move to address the ever-widening gaming ability gap, and it also happens to offer a strong replay incentive.

Originally, the Driscoll sections were to be thirdperson, but a test convinced the studio to make the change to firstperson for immersion's sake. "When I saw the T-rex looking at you directly, or Naomi Watts or Jack Black, they are not looking at you as a puppet, they are looking in your eyes, so it's quite direct physically," says Ancel. There was also the matter of top billing to consider. "Kong is the real star, more than the humans. It's cool to see Kong and to film him, and on the human side to be yourself, and not another star, another big character. It was quite logical for the game."

Sure enough, the giant gorilla commands attention as effortlessly as any matinee idol. Being Kong is overpoweringly physical, and brutally violent. He fills the screen, and the world shakes when he drops to earth from his disconcertingly graceful clambering. This swinging king obviously owes a debt to Ubisoft's famous prince, but Ancel is keen to stress that there won't be any tricksy platforming challenges. "We don't want the player to fall in a hole or something like that. Because King Kong is the King, and he can't fall because of an error with the pad."

Instead, players will enjoy the ape's unstoppable momentum as he thunders between feats of strength and agility, and wrestling fearsome dinosaurs. Raptors are swatted away easily, but T-Rexes present more of a challenge and an opportunity to use Kong's visceral array of charges, slams, punches and gruesome finishing moves. Grabbing is key, allowing you to manipulate an enemy, throwing it against the wall or other foes, or hammering away at a button to bite its throat out or rip its jaw off. Victory is celebrated with a deafening, chest-beating, vision-blurring roar.

It's all about a sense of effortless, regal power that will contrast sharply with the fraught vulnerability of the humans' fight for survival. "The big thing is that we wanted Kong to be really easy to manipulate. So when you play, even if you are doing random things with the pad, you still have good feedback. And then when you understand how to control him, you can organise this random approach into something more. It's more a refreshing time." Far from worrying how to smoothly integrate *King Kong*'s two play styles, Ubisoft Montpellier is revelling in their inconsistency. "The

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

With Ubisoft's resource-sharing philosophy bringing in staff from as far afield as Romania, Casablanca and Montreal, how does Ancel go about preserving the distinct identity and familial feel of his particular offshoot? "The core team is still the same, that's the main thing. The lead animator, the scriptwriter, the main AI programmer, the engine programmer, they are all the same guys that have been working in the videogame industry since a long time ago. I think if you still have those people that are really experienced, then you keep the spirit. And the new guys coming to the studio are very quickly in this spirit."



contrast between the two is a really core thing that we've tested in playtests," says the eager Morin. "And it works. The scale works. It works really good," he beams.

The team are conscious that such intensity, in both play styles, can't be sustained for the whole game. As free-form and gratifying as it is – and as stunningly well-staged – without some changes of gear, the action could get monotonous and the game as a whole overbearing. Ancel promises it will be punctuated with surprises and calm – the former comes in the form of cinematic, semi-interactive spectacle, like the tribal sacrifice of the film's heroine Ann to Kong, or an astonishing brontosaurus stampede ("You are still there as a player, and not as a viewer," reassures Ancel. "The FPS view is really cool for that. You can make your own camera moves"). Calm will descend during some non-linear puzzle and exploration passages, though Ancel does stress that he isn't making a sprawling adventure. These weren't demonstrated, but the suggested involvement of your AI companions in these sections is an intriguing prospect.

This facet of *King Kong* sounds to be at its best with the unlikely pairing of Kong and Ann. Ancel unexpectedly invokes *Ico* to describe their dynamic, although it sounds like Ann might be more use than Yorda ever was. Kong can pick up Ann and set her down at will. To begin with she'll run away, but as her fear recedes and trust builds, she will help Kong by going places and activating mechanisms that he can't, and will also defend herself when Kong puts her down to fight. It's the emotional dimension that he's really happy with: "The relationship is interesting, it's not done in cinematics, it's while you play... you will have a level in which Ann is chased by the T-rex, and at the end she has no other choice but to jump on you. It's a really good reward for the player."

With these deftly integrated snippets of character work, does Ancel think he's made progress on the age-old problem of wrangling film properties into the interactive medium? His answer is at once forward-thinking and old-school. "Yes, I think progress in terms of turning emotion into a game. Sometimes, when talking about emotion it's a bit abstract... When I was playing *Pac-Man* I had emotions, stress and reward. Here, although it's more complex visually, we still need to carry these feelings."

Dazzling as *King Kong* seems, it's important to remember how much is omitted from what's been shown: the puzzle elements, the practical application of the difficulty system, any significant variety in enemies or landscape, indeed how the game will address the story's final-act relocation to New York. But if Ancel and his crew can pull off everything they're attempting in *King Kong*, they'll have made significant strides in videogame immersion and accessibility, as well as providing a large audience with the rollicking, escapist entertainment they deserve.

PLATFORM JUMP

Ubisoft intends to release the Xbox 360 *King Kong* this winter, simultaneously with versions for current platforms (the handheld games are being developed separately and have not been shown). Further next-gen ports are also planned, but not confirmed. By necessity the update will be restricted to an audiovisual spit and polish, and gameplay left untouched. "Working on these consoles for this game and for the time we have to develop it, it's quite cosmetic," says Ancel. "Which is important in this game, because shadows are important, and sound... but I think on 360 and PS3 games are not going to be completely different because interfaces are the same. If interfaces could be different then really new gameplay could appear."



Dramatic camera angles aside, these shots are a fair representation of Xbox *King Kong*. PS2 and GameCube versions are noticeably scruffier, though, with forced letterboxing and a slower framerate










CAUSE AND EFFECT



'REVOLUTIONARY' 3D ENGINES ARE TEN A PENNY, BUT HERE'S ONE THAT MIGHT JUST LIVE UP TO THE CLAIM. OH. AND NOT FORGETTING ITS CREATOR'S GAME, TOO...



Just Cause is a free-roaming thirdperson action adventure set in the jungle. Right, that's the boring part out of the way – now we can discuss its developer's 3D technology. Of course, it's customary – not to say polite – to talk about the game first and technology later, but what Avalanche shows us when we visit its offices in Stockholm turns the usual norms on their head. The merit of a game like *Just Cause* is always hard to gauge this early in production, but it's already clear that the Avalanche engine its creators are also working on has wider implications for the future of game design. For anyone left sceptical by the razzmatazz of certain demos at E3 in May, Avalanche makes that future vividly, undeniably real.

"This is an internal research project," begins **Christofer Sundberg**, Avalanche's director and founding member. "At 64km by 64km it's four times the size of *Just Cause* but shares many of the same principles. The focus was on creating a world complete with realistic materials and vegetation to see what detail we could achieve on the next-generation platforms." 'An internal research project' – Sundberg makes it sound like a school homework assignment knocked together over lunchtimes. Which actually turns out to be very close to the truth. "Viktor [Blomberg, a lead programmer

TITLE: **JUST CAUSE**
FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **EIDOS**
DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE STUDIOS**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **TBA**







at Avalanche] has been doing this in his spare hours while working on *Just Cause*. Essentially it's a realtime world simulation."

Procedurally generated using algorithms, it's a world that reacts, blossoms and evolves with no substantial drain on memory. As Blomberg describes an arc over the landscape with his mouse, zooms into the fauna then follows the flight of a butterfly he shows the world to be breathtaking in its scope and beauty. Water laps gently on lakeside shores, sand crabs scuttle away when provoked and trees are as minutely detailed as you could demand. Appropriately, textures and ambient sound have been taken from northern Sweden, about five miles from Avalanche's offices. It's an idyllic Swedish ecosystem running off a commercially available PC.

"This is not an engine in its own right," continues Sundberg. "But it will be incorporated into the Avalanche engine that powers *Just Cause* that already deals with physics and AI. *Just Cause* was born from its technology, as will our next games. Really the possibilities are endless. We are thinking of many settings: a pirate game, a horror game, there's so much you can do. We are not stuck to free-roaming games. We can still do level-based games, even a *Populous* or an RTS."

For an unknown start-up developer these claims would normally be taken with a pitcher of salt, but there's something about Sundberg's assured, reasonable manner that suggests he's, if anything, underselling the technology. It should also be noted that Avalanche is a company built on strong foundations, with nearly all of its staff coming from Sweden's elite: Digital Illusions, Grin and Starbreeze. From eight people in 2003, the company is now at 63 strong (not including outsourcing) and Sundberg is still looking for more CVs. This is certainly not a company cowed by the challenges of next-gen development.

Water laps gently on shores, sand crabs scuttle away when disturbed, and trees are minutely detailed

The most exciting thing about Avalanche's tech is that it's not several years down the line but within touching distance. "Our next project will use this," states Sundberg confidently. "It's not four years away, more like two. We want a game with this beautiful world and you get to totally destroy it. Tornadoes. Napalm. Forest fires. We can even do very different planets. *Elite* is a good example – that was the first game to use procedural algorithms in a clever way and on a 32K platform. I still don't know how they did it. That's the effect we want to achieve but on PS3 or Xbox 360."

It's almost impossible to view Avalanche's tech demo without feeling giddy with excitement, but flashy graphics and clever programming won't take it far without actual play content. In *Just Cause*, however, the company has a game that can prove its ability to blend the two together effectively. It takes place on a map 32km by 32km, though this is only small by comparison to the world we've just witnessed. Significantly, if you were to drive from one end of the map to the other you wouldn't encounter a single loading pause during the journey.

Because of the awkwardness of concisely describing free-roaming games *Just Cause* has already been compared with titles as diverse as *GTA III*, *Far Cry*, *Mercenaries* and *Boiling Point*. According to which source you consult it's the bastard son of two, if not all, of the above. But Avalanche believes it has created something special in its own right.

In the company's reception area is a movie poster depicting hero Rico Rodriguez skydiving from a flaming aircraft and plummeting to the ground below. It perfectly encapsulates the flamboyance of the game: fast, energetic and huge in scope. The first thing to note is the hero's preferred method of transport: parachute. As CIA agent Rodriguez you must literally drop into a rogue South American state, San Esperito, and along with local factions instigate regime change.

Once on the ground, Rodriguez's first task is to gun down corrupt government soldiers in a small enclave, then speak to the local guerrillas. It's a blistering opening sequence clearly inspired by Ian Fleming and El Mariachi. The hero's dynamism is also evident in the novel way he can navigate the environment. As the parachute is always available, it's possible to hop from vehicle to vehicle without putting a foot on the ground. Pressing an exit button while transport is moving sees him launch back into the air, the momentum sending him skyward again. San Esperito may

The moderately handsome next-gen Avalanche technology in action (above and previous pages). Its day/night cycle and weather effects are based on real-world parameters: push a slider, and everything can be accelerated to produce thunder, lightning, snow storms, then bright, cloudless skies in a matter of seconds. Humidity, temperature, wind velocity and cloud density are all factors in creating the correct ingredients for an electrical storm





Some of *Just Cause*'s vehicles, especially the two-wheeled variety, have twitchy handling but it's being tweaked all the time. Avalanche also promises a glut of stored stats for curious players, including the number of birds shot out of the sky





be a huge world, but this form of travel ensures journeys are never dull.

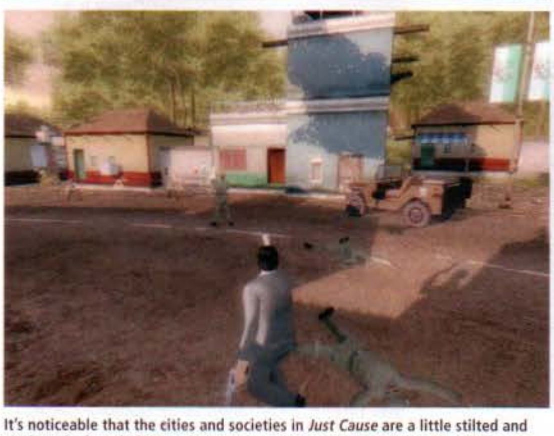
The storyline drives the experience, and hopefully this will give the game pace and direction, something other free-roaming games, like *Mercenaries*, lacked. Story missions can be found on the main map, but these will also be bolstered by further side missions, regime-change missions and bonus missions, all of which are non-compulsory. Structure comes through gradually liberating the island state, with safehouses spawning when the regime is stamped out in a particular location or when key story missions are completed. Although the non-story missions don't necessarily have to be tackled, they will grant the player rewards in the form of vehicles, equipment and savepoints – making progress less daunting.

"Even some of the missions in *Just Cause* are procedurally generated," adds Sundberg. "The game population and spawning system is all controlled by the same engine so we can concentrate on gameplay. You will rarely see two people wearing the same clothing, unless they are supposed to, of course." Free-roaming, of course, is all about the freedom and in this respect Avalanche promises that assignments can be tackled in a number of ways. Inciting rebellions, encouraging factions to fight one another or forming strong alliances with cartels are all possibilities. Major personalities in the game include a megalomaniacal despot, his two torture-loving sons and an old Nazi. With scripting by Matthew Costello (*7th Guest*, *Doom 3*) and











It's noticeable that the cities and societies in *Just Cause* are a little stilted and clockwork, though this is a factor Avalanche is working hard to fix. With such a huge world to explore it would be a shame if the cultural texture was lacking









Avalanche boasts a staff roster of 63 and is still expanding. Christofer Sundberg (centre, far left) is proud that the company he co-founded remains independent and is reluctar to license its technology – coded by Viktor Blomberg (near left) – at leas in the short term. Designer Magnus Nedfors (far left) has worked at some of Sweden's most respected developers, and faces his biggest challenge yet with *Just Cause*

Neil Richards (*Broken Sword 3: The Sleeping Dragon*), there's hope it will be compelling.

A casino, a jail and a brothel are just some of the more extravagant locations that can be found among the dense foliage, but while interior exploration is possible it's not a major feature. The safehouses store all your goodies and, once you oust a regime in another grid location, everything will be transferred between each of these havens. This cuts down on unnecessary travelling and frustration; you can also get supply drops from friendly factions once you've built up key relationships.

After testing out several vehicles (there are over 100 in total), shooting countless civilians, troops and guerrillas it's evident that *Just Cause* is robust and, at least initially, very engaging. But there's a nagging question that will not go away: won't exploring this massive, verdant world eventually get tiresome?

"We believe we have a great deal of variety for players," counters designer **Magnus Nedfors**. "The mission design has been built around several factors, including weapons, vehicles and the personalities you meet. Along with story missions, there are lots of challenges we set the player, but these are not compulsory." But, bar a couple of early missions, Avalanche has none of this to show. That's not to say they don't exist, but free-roaming games have promised so much in the past, then delivered so little, that it's unwise to get carried away until more playable features are in place.

Although there are many populated cities and communities in *Just Cause*, it doesn't have the same sense of place as, say, San Andreas. More might be more in a procedurally generated world, but sometimes you want individuality, personality and architecture that you can marvel at or just blow to pieces too. Yes, *Just Cause* does have a few recognisable locales and buildings but there's a uniformity and Eastern Bloc chic about most of it.

It's also unclear about how sophisticated and varied the AI is. Although people go about their business with some autonomy it's too early to say if this world is going to have a great deal of cultural texture and societal structure. Indeed, variety is the factor on which *Just Cause* is going to be ultimately judged. It's all very well offering several mission types, but if they all consist of simply getting to point A to gun down X number of enemies then it will quickly pall.

Scooters, mini-submarines, jets, powerboats, 18-wheeler trucks and helicopters can be utilised

Encouragingly, vehicles are both empowering and joyous, making exploration a pleasure in itself. Scooters, mini-submarines, jets, powerboats, 18-wheeler trucks and helicopters can be accommodated for casual experimentation or used for specific missions. Win a monster truck in a bonus mission and, if you can find it, you can thrash it around a specially designed arena. *Just Cause* is a toybox full to the brim with playthings, but at this stage it's impossible to say if the story and mission structure will match. The world is still under construction, but Avalanche's technology and vision certainly equals, if not exceeds, anything on current-generation technology. What it has prepared for the next few years is something else entirely.

"To make another *Doom* clone on next-gen technology would be a complete waste," concludes Sundberg. "Those kinds of games were created in the first place because they were easy to do with less power. Contained spaces, controlled environments – that's why you haven't often seen large outdoor games. Imagine running around a *Doom* environment for an hour and then coming into this…"



A wealth of gadgets and weapons are promised to allow several avenues toward success. Fights look likely to be frantic, as enemies show scant regard for their own lives



A geomorphing system in Avalancl latest tech ensures that detail moı and blends to prevent pop-up, but not something currently incorpora into *Just Cause*. The world is still impressively huge and lush and certainly up there with anything currently available on Xbox or PS2

As we depart the developer's offices in the heart of Stockholm the contrast between the traditional Swedish design ethic and what Avalanche is doing is stark. The studio is eye-catching in its minimal beauty – all sleek lines, glass partitions and crisp white décor. A far cry from the complex, busy worlds powered by the Avalanche engine.

But is this so different? Viewed from another angle there's also an economy in Avalanche's approach. An intense amount of effort has gone into finding an efficient solution to world creation, but one likely to pay huge dividends in the future. With the world taking care of itself time and resources are freed up to allow the team to work on gameplay and design principles. At least that's the theory.

Developers are always keen to show off technology, but we can say with confidence that the Avalanche engine is a wonderful, intoxicating and thrilling vision of the future. But the most exciting part is that it's a future converging with the present.





The thirdperson combat lacks sophistication and encourages a run-and-gun approach, no bad thing for a game that's more focused on exploration and vehicle use. Enemy AI also needs some extra work if it's to give the player a robust challenge













The parachute is a clever touch, allowing players fantastic views of the scenery and quick, elegant navigation. Context-sensitive commands jump the hero in and out of vehicles with relative ease



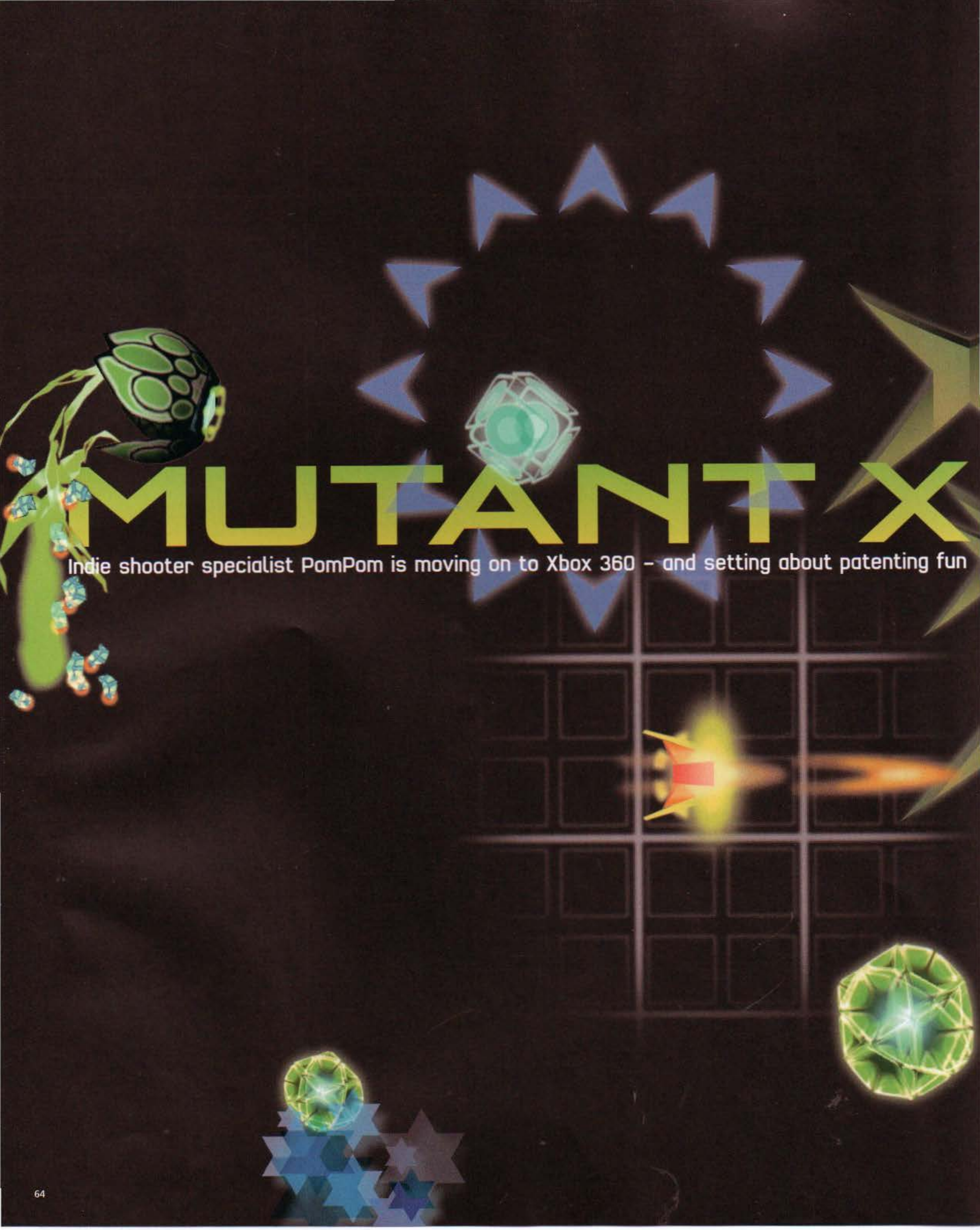
Mapping out the future

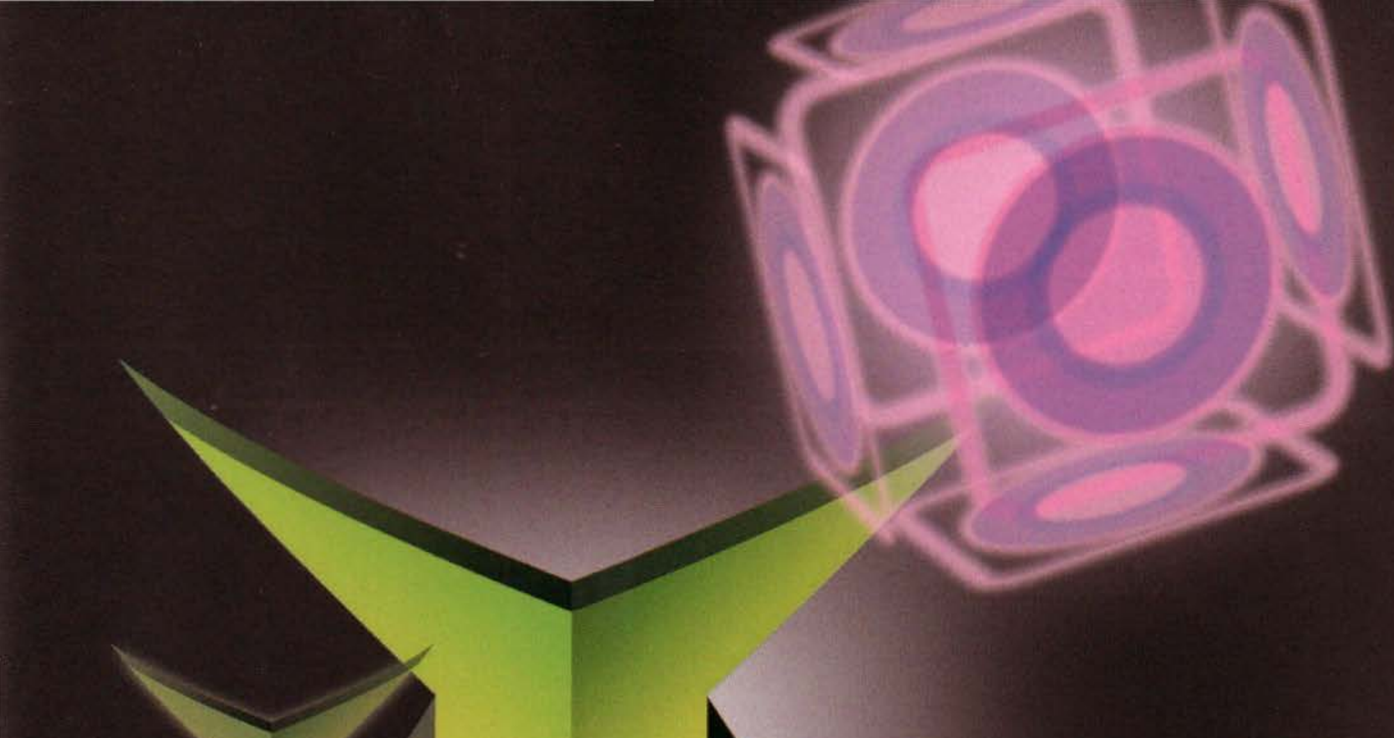
Avalanche believes that its approach to game design is not only efficient but a perfect match for the next-gen challenges ahead. Both Sony and Microsoft's consoles have impressive specs, although their powerhouse multicore processors are not backed up by the sort of memory capacity used in PCs. Sundberg believes the next two years will nevertheless see some stunning realtime imagery emerge, and after seeing the Avalanche project in all its glory it's difficult to disagree. "With consoles in general there is more processing than there is memory," he says. "This will be even more the case in the future. So what we try to do is generate everything procedurally, which doesn't require much storage space. But you still have complete control everywhere you want, you can still overwrite and have a complete metropolis in a specific area. *Just Cause* uses height map terrain, but one of the innovations we're working on is a system that allows us to generate overhangs and tunnels. That will be in the next version. Then we will be able to have any formation, steep drops with overhangs and even huge cave systems. We're well into our research on this."



MUTANT X

Indie shooter specialist PomPom is moving on to Xbox 360 – and setting about patenting fun





Michael Michael and **Miles Visman** – also known as PomPom, the homebrew heroes whose iridescent old-school shooters *Space Tripper* and *Mutant Storm* have become critical and cult favourites on the PC and Mac download scene over the last few years – are the original odd couple. Michael, the artist, is garrulous, unguarded and cheeky, always ready with a one-liner; Visman, the programmer, is cautious and quiet, with a much more sardonic (but no less quick) wit. They're pure chalk and cheese, a mock-bickering stereotype straight from some development sitcom. This is the first, last and only thing about them and what they have to tell us that's at all stereotypical.

We're sat in the Hampstead parlour of their agent **John Cook** on a balmy summer afternoon to hear how this indie minnow found itself a firstparty, next-gen developer for the biggest software company in the world, with not one but two commissions in the bag. Following *Mutant Storm*'s recent appearance on Xbox Live Arcade, Microsoft has asked PomPom to produce a tweaked and beautified remake for the launch of Xbox 360, with a more ambitious full sequel to follow. We'll also hear about a very different third project, one they consider so novel and exciting that it's under consideration at an even less likely venue: the patent office.

"Even when we set out independently we always had the Xbox in mind, but back then it seemed impossible, a pipe dream, you know? So you can imagine when Live Arcade came out, it was just unbelievable really. Just right there on our laps." Michael sounds like he still can't believe their luck. With a free demo leading to an instant, low-cost purchase, Live Arcade is a corporate echo of the self-sufficient sales technique that had enabled Michael and Visman to go it alone in the first place. It was an obvious fit.

Live Arcade has not been aggressively promoted in this generation, the consensus being that it's a dry run for the full realisation of its potential on Xbox 360, where it will be integrated with the dashboard, and free to access. "I think you would say, as an experiment it was very successful," says Michael. Cook agrees: "The thing that Microsoft was focused on was the conversion rate: the number of people that download the demo versus the number of people that buy. And the conversion rate on Xbox Live Arcade has been phenomenal. It blows away anything you've ever seen on any PC download. Our game has performed astonishingly well like that.

"The people at Microsoft are so deliriously happy that they said: 'If we bike you a 360 development kit over can you please make something that's going to be ready for launch?'" They were happy to agree, but had ideas for how to take it further, so the

two-stage plan of remake and sequel was agreed. The games are currently codenamed *Mutant Storm Reloaded* and *Mutant Storm Revolution*, Matrix-style: "It won't stay that way," says Michael, pointedly.

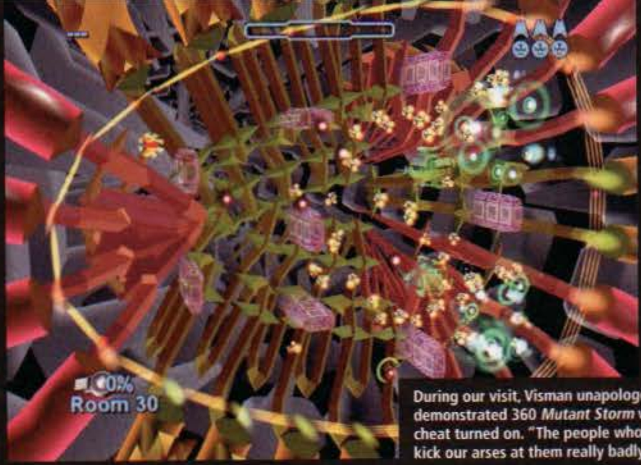
Currently, the pair is focused on giving a very close port of *Mutant Storm* as much audiovisual clout as time and the 360 will allow, hoping to capitalise on the sugar-rush excitement of bringing new hardware home, in which they think the free Arcade demos might play an important part. "Anyone that wants to show their 360 off when they get it out the box, they're going to have the two games that they bought, and then they're going to have Live Arcade. Our aim is to be the thing that they download from Live Arcade and go: 'Shit!', and get a really full-on experience. And then buy it," explains Cook. "Please," adds Michael.

Lathered in lurid specular lighting and reflective effects, and with dynamic backdrops giving the tilting playfield hypnotic depth, it's already quite a spectacle

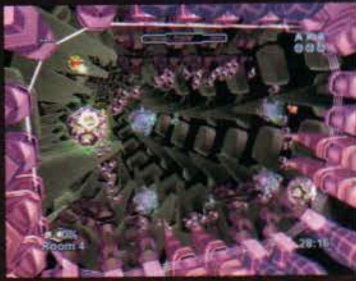
Lathered in lurid specular lighting and bright reflective effects, and with dynamic backdrops giving the tilting 2D field of play a hypnotic depth, it's already quite a spectacle. On the audio front, the pair are bringing a third party in to take sound duties off their hands completely, reworking the effects and providing – in a first for PomPom – a full musical score. "We're talking to our sound guy at the moment about having some kind of dynamic score that changes depending on what's onscreen. So it feels more anxious when it's a more dangerous situation, then it calms down. We think it may be feasible but we don't really know yet," says Michael.

The makeover is more than skin-deep, though; Visman mentions that it will be a little easier, in the early stages at least, to allow more players to see more of the game. But accessibility can also be an issue for the best players, who have complained that the original's purist, linear structure makes it too much of a time commitment at the highest level (the current top score is for a five-hour game). The response is a new open level-select mode, with the high score being a cumulative tally: "Players who are really good at it could sit for ten minutes and play a couple of levels that they wanted to improve their score on without committing to that huge outlay," says Michael. They also feel that a low-commitment, coffee-break ethos is what will best differentiate Live Arcade products from more involved mainstream titles. The original structure will still be available, though: "Because some people for some reason like that marathon lunacy."

Finally, they hope to include Live support for the twoplayer mode, and maybe even a new competitive game style, with "one guy playing the actual game, and then somehow having the second player controlling where the aliens come in from. It's just an idea, it may fail miserably, but we're going to experiment," says Michael. "I think one of the cool things about the simplicity of this kind of game is that you can try out different things very quickly, and you know very quickly whether they work or not," adds Cook.



During our visit, Visman unapologetically demonstrated 360 *Mutant Storm* with an invincibility cheat turned on. "The people who play our games kick our arses at them really badly," says Michael









Alongside improved textures and poly count, Visman and Michael are using vertex and pixel shaders, normal mapping, specular lighting and reflective effects for the first time in their *Mutant Storm* remake









CRYSTAL FEST

PomPom isn't the only client of Cook's to gain a foothold on Xbox 360 Live Arcade. Isle of Wight-based Stainless Games, of *Carmageddon* infamy, has two projects in production for it which will be available alongside *Mutant Storm* at launch. One is *Novadrome*, a futuristic vehicle combat game which promises Live network play as well as singleplayer modes. The other is an update *Crystal Quest* (originally written by Stainless co-founder Patrick Buckland), the venerable abstract shooter that helplessly enslaved so many Apple users over the years. This could well clean up the nostalgia vote when 360 Arcade arrives.

"We're trying to get away from that whole Tron look that the last one had and give it a bit more substance," says Michael. The revamped *Mutant Storm*'s familiar psychedelic art style is at once more metallic, organic and strangely cute than before



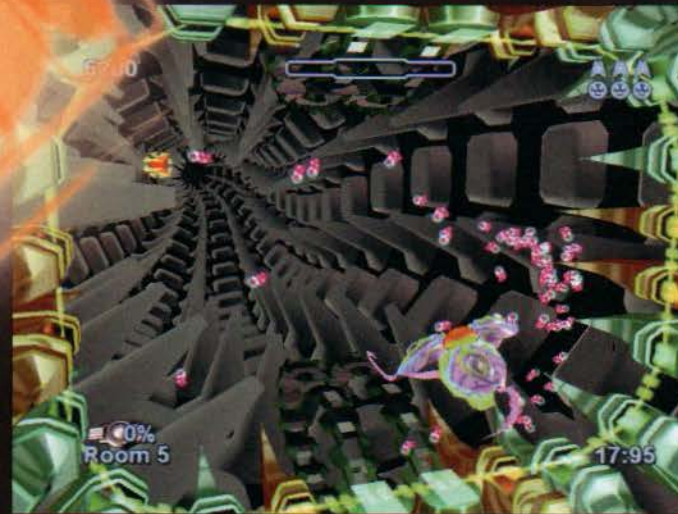
This flexibility enables a speculative, trial-and-error approach to game design that Michael and Visman clearly relish. At the moment, they refuse to guarantee anything about the 'true sequel' (even down to it bearing the *Mutant Storm* name), but its form is starting to take shape. According to Michael, "it's going to be a little bit of a cross between *Space Tripper* and *Mutant Storm*, in that it's going have themed worlds and bigger environments that you scroll through like *Space Tripper*, but the gameplay is going to be the *Robotron*-style twin-stick *Mutant Storm* thing. And that's all even we know at this stage." They also moot the inclusion of more 'adventure-type', mission-based elements, including defensive tasks. Beyond that, and the art you see here, there are only possibilities.

Do they ever reach a point where they have to stop themselves putting in new ideas, because the point of their games is their simplicity? "Definitely," says Michael, and points to his partner. "He says that to me." "No," corrects the programmer, "we run out of time."

Michael laughs. "And money, yeah... Funnily enough *Mutant Storm* came out pretty much perfect, for what we intended. We were left a bit wanting with *Space Tripper*, because we ran out of time and money, and we wanted more. But *Mutant Storm* was a good experience for us, because we finished it and... it was finished. If anything we had to take stuff out by the end. That gave us a bit of confidence. We won't have any trouble knowing where to draw the line."

In contrast to the current angst over the inflated costs and labour-intensive nature of next-gen development, they are extremely relaxed about managing it between the two of them, especially with help on the audio. Michael says the more graphically-intensive sequel might be a different story, however: "Once we've laid down the general themes, then we might get people in to help us fill all the holes and get it all done... It all depends how well the tools go. We're big fans, we like to write a lot of tools to help us; I mean, there are only two of us, so we do have to. So you never really know, if you spend the right amount of time in the beginning setting it all out properly with the right kind of level editors so it makes it all nice and comfortable to work with, we may not need that much more extra help. Even if we do need somebody I don't think it'll be for very long."

It's purely a content issue, too. "From a programming point of view," notes Visman with satisfaction, "it's quite all right to do on my own."



Mutant Storm's sperm-flower level is now even more squirm-inducing. "My girlfriend says she likes the game but something about it makes her really uncomfortable. She says that about all my graphics, actually," laments Michael. Don't expect many 360 games to look like this

Michael and Visman served together at Argonaut before founding PomPom, and met before that when they both worked for Cook at his own company, Cranberry Source. The agent and the coder have an even longer shared history, having both been involved in a series of experimental music-themed projects – including a Coldcut-soundtracked game called *Top Banana* and DIY pop video applications for the Philips CDi – that betray Visman's art school roots. It was via an art tool that he got interested in programming. "Games were a side issue, I suppose. I wanted to bring a slightly different aesthetic to games, which was quite hard on an Amiga or ST."

As for Michael: "I was born slightly after these kids did this stuff... Cranberry was my first job. I wasn't involved in anything before then apart from loafing around and not working, as much as possible." "Michael is a force of bloody nature actually, when he starts working," says Cook. "Jon Ritman, who was with me at Cranberry Source, said Michael was

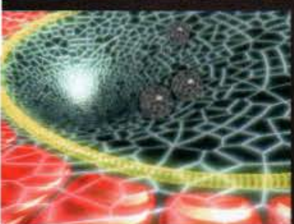
Left to right: John Cook (agent), Michael Michael (artist) and Miles Visman (programmer). On the table: Murphy (cat)



the fastest, bestest 3D artist he ever worked with." Despite having many other clients, industry veteran Cook comes across as PomPom's third member rather than its mere mouthpiece, a one-man PR department, dealmaker and business brain who's been instrumental in their success. "And, you know, he's a friend," says Michael simply. His involvement in and love for their games is plain to see.

When the pair first formed PomPom four-and-a-half years ago, they had to take odd jobs to make ends meet. "Every time we were very nearly skint we would do a bit of work here and there just to scrape by," says Michael. "Plus the online PC sales just kind of trickled through the whole time. That helped." He's amazed by the differing shelf-lives of online and retail sales. "I mean, *Space Tripper*'s been selling at a consistent rate for about the last four years or so. It's a whole other kettle of fish, really. The lifespan just goes on and on."





The full sequel to *Mutant Storm*, currently codenamed *Revolution*, is at least a year and a half away. These early screenshots show the expanded, themed and more three-dimensional environments that, PomPom admits, it might take an expanded team to create

"I think there's a big pool of people who are playing it, and their guilt factor, it's like a graph," says Cook. "After 20 hours' play they go: 'Shit, I should really, really buy it'." Some sales have a more charitable motivation. "We've had people who've bought several copies because they don't feel like it's enough money," Michael adds.

A deal with Sold Out to sell some budget boxed copies eased the pain further, but no potential revenue stream could be left untapped. "Besides that we had the deal with the bike people," remembers Visman. "I don't know if I want to talk about that..." Improbably, a company called Exertis licensed *Space Tripper* for its exercise bike entertainment systems (without, perhaps, enough consideration for its customers' heart rates). "My missus has got it in her gym," announces Michael, to general disbelief.

It's been a hard road at times, but neither would consider a return to mainstream development. "If I'm going to stay in games, I like this small team thing," says Michael. "It's quite nice working with just Miles. I don't know if he'll agree..." ("Well, for the sake of argument, I'll agree," interjects Visman dryly.) "It's so much better than working in big teams, which is a nightmare, because everyone likes different things and everyone has an opinion. With two of us it's just, I tell Miles how it's going to be, and he says: 'Yes, boss'."

Ironically, it was while playing around with another tribute to a vintage arcade game – *Missile Command*, this time – that the duo made an intuitive leap that would lead to their most original concept to date. This concept is currently realised as a showcase PC demo (indeed, a nearly complete game) called *Bliss* that is being demonstrated to publishers and getting "a lot of interest". The idea was that *Missile Command*'s expanding, circular explosions would push objects away rather than destroy them, giving them a vector. When gravity was added to the equation, it created something rather like juggling.

They were instantly hooked: "It was just so much more fun than the







***Bliss*, PomPom's original concept-fo sale, is introduced via a cute backstory written by an allegedly 'world-famous author', mention of whom causes a great deal of enigmatic giggling between PomP**

ARCADE ADVENTURES

On 360, Xbox Live Arcade will be free to access for the consumer – although online multiplayer functions of its games will still require a Gold subscription – but how free will access be for developers? We caught up with **Ross Erickson**, games portfolio manager for the service, to find out Microsoft's plans for the platform.

The original Xbox Live Arcade mission statement mentions 'broad appeal, casual' games. Are you sticking with that focus, or broadening the range of content?
We certainly aren't moving away from game experiences that can best be described that way, but we are also looking at new genres of games that would also be appealing to more serious gamers as well.

Arcade has the potential to be a haven for small developers, like PomPom, who wouldn't otherwise get to work on a home console. Is that something you'd like to see?
Yes, by all means. I am inundated with calls and enquiries from both small and large developers – and publishers – who view Arcade as a revolutionary new model that will allow them to still be creative and get amazing games directly into the hands of players, both serious and casual. We're very committed to building this ecosystem where developers who aren't working on huge projects can thrive and let their creative genius have an outlet directly to the player.

How would a small developer with a great game idea go about getting it on Live Arcade?
That's simple – they contact me and we discuss the game concept, the business model and the technical requirements associated with making the game.

Will you be maintaining tight control over what's published, or will you be opening it up to as many publishers and developers as possible?
Yes, we still maintain an editorial control of what the overall portfolio is going to look like. Rampant, wild, uncontrolled growth of the ecosystem will cause it to collapse in on itself, particularly in the early stages of Xbox 360 in the marketpla as the Live userbase begins to grow. successful ecosystem is one where th right games are available to the customer at the right time so these developers can be profitable and continue developing more games. In addition, we also want to ensure that the customer doesn't have to navigate through 15 versions of basically the same game. While we will certainly support high-quality variety in the portfolio, we also don't need to have multiple version of *Hearts*.



These eerie, translucent creatures (below) are early enemy models for the full sequel to *Mutant Storm*, and give an indication as to how unrestrained the tiny company's graphical ambitions are for Xbox 360



Their confidence in their invention is sky-high, and it's not hard to see why the moment you play it: it's fresh, moreish and could appeal to a broad audience

other stuff that we just scrapped the game and focused entirely around this whole bouncing balls around idea. It just evolved from there," says Michael. "It certainly wasn't our intention. But it was so obvious, once we first tried it." They've allowed a suite of very simple, recognisable minigames to develop naturally around this unusual – and immediately, compulsively enjoyable – control mechanism: balls are used to break advancing lines of bricks, lobbed into holes, and bounced off targets and each other. "There's bit of *Breakout*, a bit of snooker, a bit of basketball," says Michael. It's so instinctive and familiar that its developers initially thought it must have been done before, but so far as they can tell, it hasn't.

Cook was so deeply impressed with the novelty of this mechanic that he saw it as priceless intellectual property, and in need of protection. He wondered if it could be patentable, found that it was, and PomPom has applied. But how on earth do you go about patenting a game mechanic? You give it verbal expression, but, says Visman, "you have to use slightly different language. Whereas you can see an explosion, in the patent application we've called it an expanding boundary, to make it more generalised. So that rather than just games, it could apply to any kind of application."

Any application? In fact, they do want to make a game of it, but it's an indication of how big their thinking is on this project, and how widely they're touting it. In the bright world of *Bliss*, the player controls a furry, long-snouted creature that can create explosive puffs of air with pinpoint accuracy, and the goals are to feed furry monsters, knock spiders into lava pits, and shake aphids off flowers.

But almost any explanation and any 'vaguely cuddly' IP could be applied to it, and, Cook feels: "You could put that on any platform, coin-op, mobile, anything, and you could find a game that would work with it."

"We consider the DS the perfect platform for this. DS or mouse is the best way to play it," says Michael, but they've got it working on an analogue stick and think it could be fine-tuned for any input method. Their confidence in their invention is sky-high, and it's not hard to see why the moment you play it, because it's fresh, very moreish, and could appeal to an extremely broad audience. Cook puts his money where his mouth is: "I'd be very disappointed if someone didn't pick this up in quite a major way."

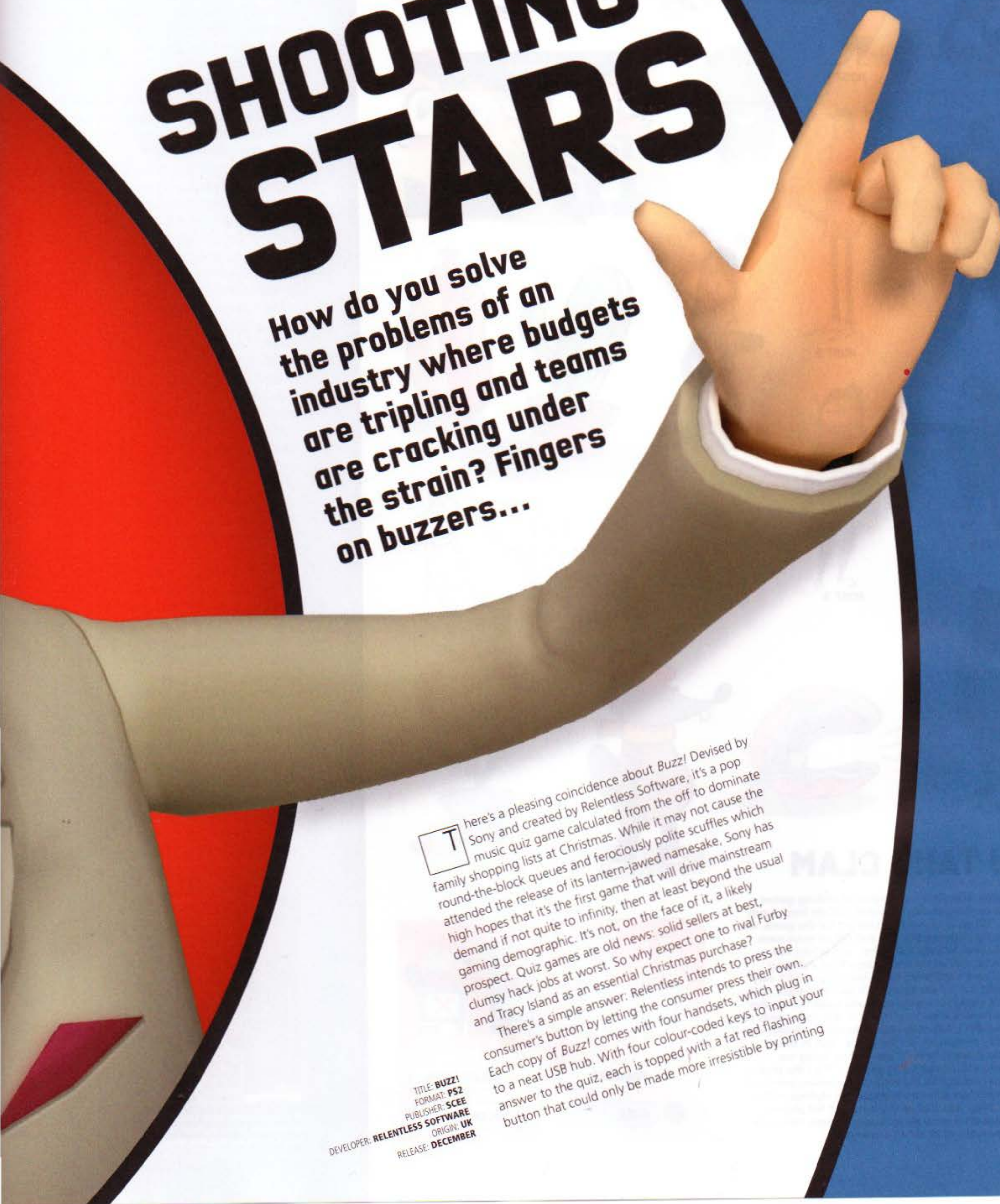
If it did, it would be the perfect end to what Cook calls "another overnight success story that took five years;" an uplifting tale in which sacrifice is rewarded, originality recognised, the little guy wins and the big guy turns out not to be so bad after all. It's almost too much to hope for. But hope is what so many small developers need, and based on what it has already achieved, it's what PomPom has to give.



The black dot above is your cursor, and the yellow bloom around it the small explosion (or 'expanding boundary') that is used to bounce and repel balls around the screen in the innovative *Bliss*. The smiley-faced flowers are score-multiplying bumpers







SHOOTING STARS

How do you solve the problems of an industry where budgets are tripling and teams are cracking under the strain? Fingers on buzzers...

There's a pleasing coincidence about *Buzz!* Devised by Sony and created by Relentless Software, it's a pop music quiz game calculated from the off to dominate family shopping lists at Christmas. While it may not cause the round-the-block queues and ferociously polite scuffles which attended the release of its lantern-jawed namesake, Sony has high hopes that it's the first game that will drive mainstream demand if not quite to infinity, then at least beyond the usual gaming demographic. It's not, on the face of it, a likely prospect. Quiz games are old news: solid sellers at best, clumsy hack jobs at worst. So why expect one to rival Furby and Tracy Island as an essential Christmas purchase?

There's a simple answer: Relentless intends to press the consumer's button by letting the consumer press their own. Each copy of *Buzz!* comes with four handsets, which plug in to a neat USB hub. With four colour-coded keys to input your answer to the quiz, each is topped with a fat red flashing button that could only be made more irresistible by printing

TITLE: **BUZZ!**
FORMAT: **PS2**
PUBLISHER: **SCEE**
DEVELOPER: **RELENTLESS SOFTWARE**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **DECEMBER**

the words 'Do Not Press This Button' on it. It's intended to end the era of shouting out at home. Anyone smugly convinced that their fingers are frequently both first and fastest car now be required to put their buzzer where their mouth is.

It's this inclusion that elevates *Buzz!* from stocking filler to centre stage, and it wasn't until Relentless considered the idea of the buzzers that the team was able to overcome it innate scepticism for the project. **David Amor** creative director, explains: "Sony had already hooked up with a company that was able to supply questions and answers and clips, so they said: 'We're thinking of making a quiz game...' and to be honest our first reaction was: [pulls face] 'A quiz game?' Because you've seen *Millionaire* and stuff, and I know it sold well but it didn't seem like great entertainment – I think the problem is that the games that have been made have been made by people who've said: 'Oh yeah, we'll do this on the side but then well get back to making real videogames'. There's no reason why the production values should be any less than *Metal Gear Solid*, but they seem to be. So we thought if we do it properly and put buzzers in the box then it would be pretty accessible and great fun."

Once the idea of the buzzers clicked into place, however, Amor quickly became convinced that they were on to a winner. "Sony had already proved the market with *SingStar* and EyeToy, but they rely on you being fairly exhibitionist; this is even more accessible because you don't have to make a ti out of yourself." Having dismissed most previous parlour videogames as inept or unappealing, he turned instead to the classics: "I just remembered what I do at Christmas, what I do with my family – that scrabble at the beginning of Monopoly to make sure you get the boot – I seem to remember that's quite entertaining. And I remember it being fun when someone lands on Mayfair and I own it. That's good interaction. It's not the game entertaining me in that scenario; it's me and the other person entertaining each other. So when we set about doing this, we said OK – what circumstances can we force on people so that they're teasing each other and having fun? That was our design approach."



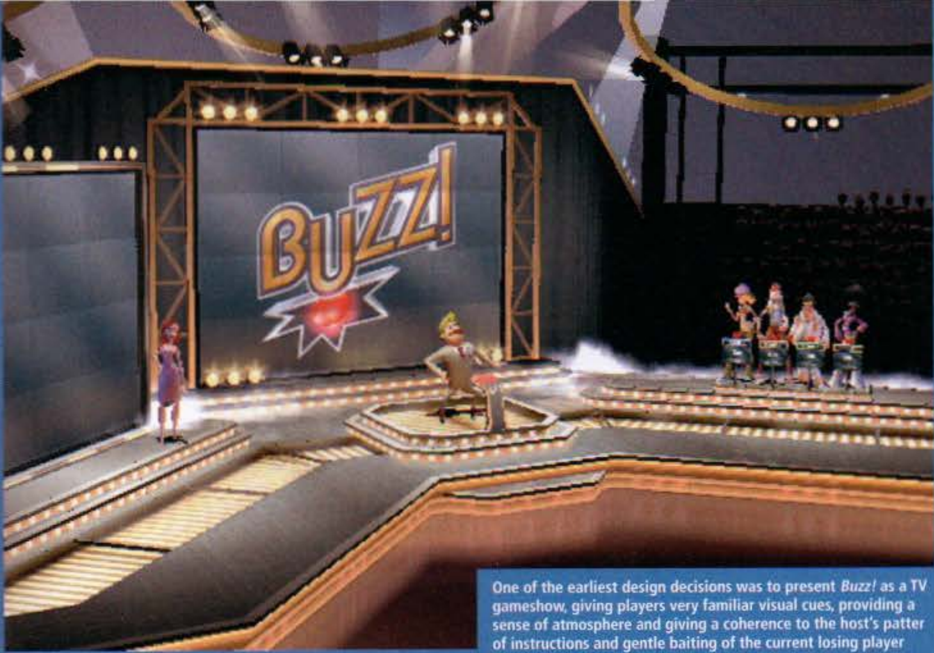
The game's interface is simple and clear, adapting to the rules of different rounds without ever confusing players about what they have to do, or where they stand in the overall competition



WU TANG CLAM

Even though Relentless has a policy of making games accessible to non-gamers, old habits still die hard. Amor explains: "When we came to do the art for the game, we were playing *Katamari Damacy* and the art guys were like: 'Yeah, cool, let's do it like this', so the host was a talking cactus and all the music came from a singing clam. And Sony said: 'Well, that's very nice and it's very entertaining but it's not exactly ITV Saturday night now, is it? We're going for massmarket and quite frankly this is a bit up its own arse. Your frame of reference needs to be Ant And Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway' – which was a tough day of research for the artists – but in truth that's what it needs to be. If you end up being too esoteric you end up confusing people – 'Am I the singing clam or the hotdog? Or the tooth?'" A revision produced human characters with the exaggerated stylings of the Muppets. Sony was sold on the host, but felt players would want even more recognisable avatars, hence the obvious parodies of musician archetypes.





One of the earliest design decisions was to present *Buzz!* as a TV gameshow, giving players very familiar visual cues, providing a sense of atmosphere and giving a coherence to the host's patter of instructions and gentle baiting of the current losing player

It has resulted in a simple game that wears its TV inspiration on its sleeve. Set inside an instantly recognisable format, players vie to recognise song snippets fastest, to dredge the real name of some near-forgotten prog-rock star from their memories and to nominate the coolest person in the room if a boyband question comes up: do you duck the question and lose the points or reveal an embarrassingly encyclopaedic knowledge of early 911 hits?

Development director **Andrew Eaves**, however, reveals that maintaining this simplicity was the game's biggest challenge: "One of the toughest things was to eliminate complexity. You traditionally design a game, and people tend to make it really complicated because it's for people who've played a similar game before. It's very much about that GDC keynote that Nintendo's Satoru Iwata gave, when he challenged pretty much every gamer and every geek at GDC – and I was one of them – to go out and make something that you won't play. And I'm not saying we make games that we don't want to play, but it's that idea that you make a game that isn't for a *Halo 2* fan or a *GTA* fan, but is something my mum or my brother would want to play."

So is there a three-step evolutionary process at work – we started with gamers making games for gamers, and now we have gamers making games for non-gamers, and we're moving toward a point where non-gamers are making games for non-gamers? Eames thinks we're there already: "Although I did start out as a gamer, now I've evolved in my life and my habits so that although I'm concentrating on games when I'm at work, when I go home I don't really play at all. Simply because I've grown up, I've got a life outside of games, I've got a child, I've got other things to do. And I think that as the industry expands it has to involve people who are growing up, who've got children, who've got friends who don't understand why you spent your entire youth playing games."

But Amor is quite open about the fact that this willingness to abandon hardcore game design ambition is as much pragmatic as it is theoretical: "We've made a deliberate company policy about this – playing through something like *Half-Life 2*, I think: 'Jesus Christ, I don't know how I'd go up against that'. There was a time when I would have tried, but now the great thing is that you don't need to. So I take my hat off to the guys who do that stuff. I saw some new *Project Gotham 3* shots the other day, and it's just – how could we compete with that? Not only in the terms of the numbers of the team but of the skill involved. But while there's certainly a consumer who will lap that up, the question is how many of them there are. I think the thing is that however many there are, they don't grow that much – they grow, but not at the same rate as social and lifestyle gaming." He's quick to acknowledge that the Relentless vision of the future is only one of the ways in which gaming is going to evolve, but it's clear he sees it as the one with the lowest risk and the highest potential returns.

"I SAW SOME NEW PROJECT GOTHAM 3 SHOTS THE OTHER DAY; HOW COULD WE COMPETE WITH THAT?"

It's this kind of deliberate manifesto that is at the heart of how Relentless operates. The studio was born out of the ashes of Computer Artworks, following what Amor sums up as some 'bad deals'. Having been brought up in Brighton, he'd convinced William Latham to open a studio there, and found himself with the future of its employees on his hands when CA shut its doors. With work on the *DJ* [*Decks & FX*] project already underway, he had to talk fast to win Sony round and retool the remnants of CA Brighton into the core of Relentless. "I'm a very straightforward person, and in the videogame industry there's a real – excuse my language – fuck them before they fuck you attitude: 'Let's see how much money we can screw out of publishers, see if we can get away with this that and the other', and that always seemed to overcomplicate my life – I'm not a very good liar, so we'd always had a very straight relationship with Sony on *DJ*. So, when the company hit the wall, it was: 'Well, the team's still here, we want to finish the game, we're not stupid, why don't we just assemble ourselves?'" Sony, glad to see its investment in *DJ* didn't need to be wasted, provided immediate support to the studio. Amor brought Eames on board, and Relentless was born. Both men had long daydreamed about running their own studio, but reality hit in a flash. "It didn't take us very long to be up and running," says Eames. "David closed the doors on the 17th of October and we founded the company on the 22nd."

For Eames, Relentless became an opportunity to address issues that had been frustrating him for years. Sick of being required by studios to impose working practices on his teams he didn't approve of, he had his own agenda for Relentless: "When we set up we decided that we weren't going to play by the old rules, we weren't going to make the games the way we had been forced to by our old bosses. I've tried dozens of project-management systems and none of them has ever worked, and we've been late, or it's killed the team. I mean, 23 companies went bust that year, so why use the same process that all those 23 used? It just seemed madness. So we said, 'Right, guys, we want you in by nine, we want you out by five, and there's no internet on your desktop: you can use the internet café area in the office, you can do as much browsing as you like, you can stay there all day, but you can't do it at your desk'."

At a time when many are campaigning to have developers acknowledged as victimised – overworked, over-pressured, underpaid – Amor is scathing about the practices he found to be commonplace over the years: "Every games company I've ever worked at is half youth club,





half company. The rest of the working world goes and works and then goes home, that's how it is – that's why it's called work. But in the videogame industry people turn up and say: 'OK, let's download some pictures of cats in hats for a while, and then have some coffee, and then let's forward some jokes around.'

For Eames, the results of the system were immediate: "At first it was kind of weird for everyone but then they realised how it was going to work. There was a moment for me when I looked round and it was 10.30 and everyone was at their desks, in focus, working hard. I was working on the schedule and I'd just done more work in an hour and a half than I used to get done in a day. With the old system, when you walk past someone and they're browsing away, you don't know if it's because they worked 'til midnight the night before, of if they're just taking the piss. And, quite frankly, I don't want to even have to think about that, and because you're a nice human being you think: 'Oh, well, they must be getting on with their work' and then suddenly you're missing deadlines and shipping a shoddy project."

Some may say relentless is the word, but for Amor the current clamour over working conditions, brought to a head by the blog of an EA staffer's wife, is unnecessary. "It's really avoidable. We didn't react to the EA Spouse thing because we'd already done something about it. And, not to be too cocky, it had already been working for a year. And you hear stories about people like David Jaffe saying: 'Oh, *God Of War* took forever – blood, sweat and tears, but that's how it has to be to make great games'. And I think – maybe because we're making a different kind of game – but I genuinely think that if you plan it right, and you work when you're in the office – it's all really boring stuff – but it all becomes predictable. We've never been an hour late with any of our milestones. I just think everyone's got better things to do after 5pm than stay in the office downloading things or playing games. And for those who are working, if you look at the quality of work that gets done in those late hours…"

"ANOTHER THING THAT FRUSTRATES ME IS THAT A LOT OF DEVELOPERS BITCH ABOUT THE LONG HOURS"

"If you look at when a bug is introduced," interrupts Eames, "it will almost always be after the person has done eight hours work."

He's passionate about the inefficiencies of the old crunch-dependent ways of working, not least from his experience as a contractor: "You come in at the shit-end of a project, and the reason you're there – because you're really expensive – is that it's all gone tits-up some time ago, and they've only just decided to do something about it. And you're working with a team of people who are exhausted – they are shattered, they've been working 16 hours a day, seven days a week, they haven't seen their wives or their girlfriends properly for months. And you go in, and they can't see the obvious any more. And the things I've had to point out to teams – you know, if you just switch that thing on your game will build in 20 minutes instead of four hours, if you'd just version your savegames then your testers, every time you change the code, wouldn't need to go through the entire game to test that last level again. Really simple things because everyone's shattered. And you're going in doing your nine to five, and you feel guilty as sin walking out each night, but you have to think I'm not being paid to kill myself. In fact, I'm only effective because I'm not killing myself."

Not that Amor is any less outspoken: "Another thing that frustrates me is that a lot of videogame developers really bitch about the long hours they have to do, and how other industries pay better and they don't have to do such long hours, and I'm reading this long tome – this is at home, of course! – and it's



The core of the team is formed from old Computer Artworks staff, but includes newcomers. Relentless also outsources specific tasks on each project to external staff





The buzzers are hugely satisfying to use, giving coach potatoes a chance to prove that they really could have won all those episodes of Millionaire, they really could. The red button also flashes, allowing for an occasional round which requires fast reflexes as well as a mental resevoir of pop trivia

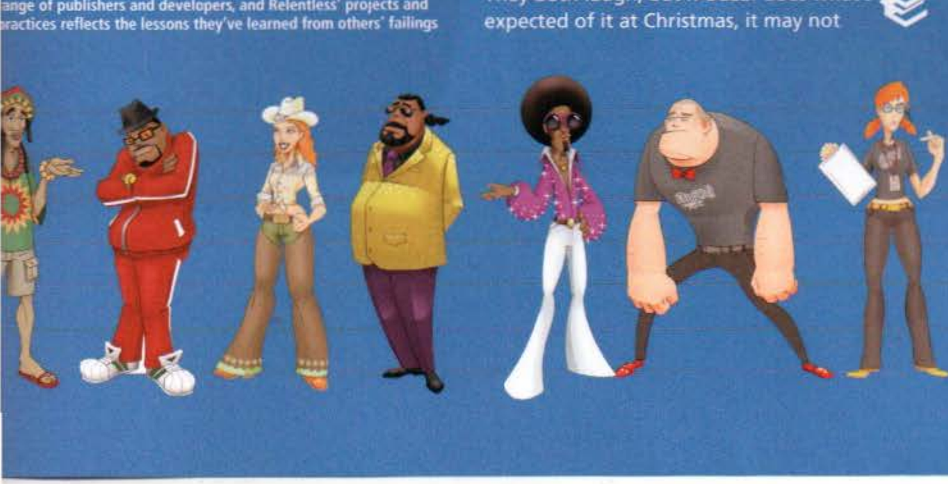
een written on some forum at three in the fternoon. And I think – well, that doesn't add up. How come you have the time to write hat? But I don't think we're anything like nique – I think Eurocom, who I have a lot of espect for, don't have internet at their desks, I hink Rare may not either. And I think it sets a good precedent for other things – is it OK to lay *Solitaire*, is it OK to play *Half-Life* at their desks? I can't see the crossover between *Half-Life* at your desk and working on *Buzz!*"

Eames relents a little: "We let people play ingleplayer games – and MMOs, actually – at unch. But you can't involve anyone else in the game you're playing, you have to have eadphones on, it has to be the thing you're doing instead of reading the paper or whatever." Amor picks up the thread: "And people say: 'So we can't play *ISS*? That's crazy, his is a games company!' But I think for *Buzz!* here's more to learn in watching a TV gameshow than there is playing *ISS*. And if hey want to play *ISS*, then they're all going home at 5pm, so they can do it then. But one of the things that we found is that people who'd been working in the games industry for a long time, they'd really lost that social life after work, because their social life was work. So they'd hang around in the office 'til about 9pm, and then have something to eat and then go home and watch telly. I think for a lot of people a lot of the allure of working in games s that there's a lot of camaraderie and that kind of social club atmosphere at work. And there are plenty of companies who still have that, but I prefer to go home and see my family." He shrugs, but both are clearly aware that life at Relentless sounds a little totalitarian, even if it's a totalitarianism designed around the principle of getting people home from work in time for Neighbours. "I'm sure there are people who wouldn't want to come and work for us," acknowledges Eames, "who think: 'Christ, I don't want that lifestyle'. And that's fine. But we don't want to change how we do things."



ndrew Eames (left) and David Amor are veterans of a wide ange of publishers and developers, and Relentless' projects and ractices reflects the lessons they've learned from others' failings

And so a studio of less than 30 people working on a leftfield project for non-gamers seems to be sitting on the answers to the two questions that are consuming the videogame industry at the moment: how do we fund making the elaborate, complex games that the hardcore demand, and how do we make them without killing our staff? Relentless' solution is simple: you don't, and you don't. But their model is interdependent: it's by focusing on massmarket-targeted games that they create projects which can be managed with small teams and humane working hours. It works, but isn't the price selling out? Delivering watered-down software on demand, rather than working to create an ambitious vision? It's clear, however, there's no shortage of ambition at Relentless. For Amor, it's reach: "We're here to make games, to make money for companies. It's a business. But I want to make games that as many people as possible are going to play and enjoy. Not just the hardcore." For Eames, it's quality: "I want anything going out there with the Relentless badge on it to be the finest game it can be. I want Sony's QA department to say this is the most unbuggy game it has ever seen. That's what we aim at." And is it frustrating, knowing that you have a sustainable model which most of the industry is ignoring? "Not at all!" beams Amor. "It's lovely for us. Gives us a clear playing field..." They both laugh, but if *Buzz!* does what's expected of it at Christmas, it may not



TOUCHING BASE

Kevin McSherry, software development manager at SCEE, was part of the brainstorming meetings with Relentless which lead to the decision to include the buzzer. We asked him how it all came about.

What was your first response to the buzzer?
Initially it seemed like quite a strange idea. What we were saying was that the control that my company had developed – the DualShock – was simply not good enough for what we wanted to do, and that's quite a hard one for someone who's loyal to the company to come up against. But once we started down that path, we found out we could make a controller that was much easier to navigate. I think the start point comes from identifying who we want to play this game, and we want families on Christmas Day – with granny and elderly uncle – to be able to explain quickly and easily what they need to do.

Has the success of the EyeToy made it easier for Sony to consider this kind of product?
I think the shift comes through our territories enjoying success with EyeToy. Once you have success with territories like the Spanish part of our business – which feels very independent from the rest of the company – once they've got over the hurdles of the business model, they say: 'You were right, there *is* a market out there for it, there *are* consumers who want to play lifestyle rather than hardcore, retailers are comfortable taking on a bulkier box, consumers do like buying a product in a larger box because it feels like there's more value'. Once they've got over and learned those lessons, it became a new way of working.

Who did you work with for the design of the buzzer?
In the end, we enlisted the help of the Sony Design Centre – these are the guys who work out the interface for the Vaio PCs and make all the remote controls we get in Europe – they're a human-interface design group, the people who specialise in the link between the consumer and the product. They brought some new thinking into the process – they lead us into having a buzzer that sits up on top of the hand.

How aware are you during the design process of the needs of left-handed people and those with disabilities?
Totally aware of those issues. Because we wanted *Buzz!* to appeal to as many people as possible, we wanted consumers to be able to play with one hand – that was part of our design from the very beginning. We keep looking at these areas – we've looked at concepts which include a series of dots on the buttons – almost like Braille – which lets you know which button is which without looking. Now, obviously that's not appropriate for this project, but it's something we're always actively considering. We're even looking at games that are dependent on audio feedback – on the consumers shouting out – so we're right on that.


SONY
POWER
HOLD
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START
SCORE 100
TIME 0:05
RINGS 6
SONY
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HOLD
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LEVEL 0
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LINES 25
SONY
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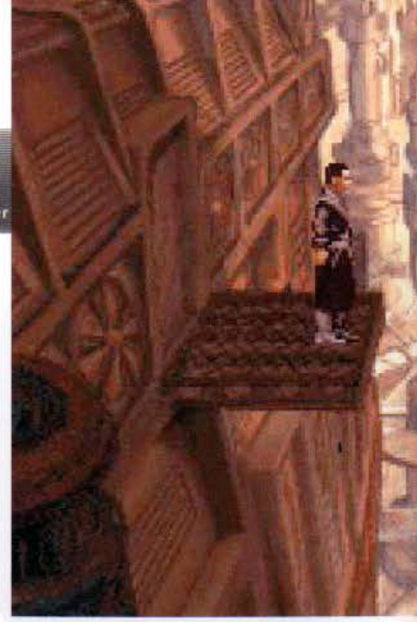
PLAYSTATION FREEDOM

PORTABLE, POWERFUL, PROGRAMMABLE: WILL THE PSP SCENE PROVE TO BE HOMEBREW'S MOST MEMORABLE?

Today's generation of gamers feels deprived, deceived and disillusioned by an industry fast conglomerating into fortified hives where little creed exists beyond the maintenance of power and profitability. Something must bridge the gap between the ports, the licences and the inane blingware that result. As publishers tear the features from their faces to avoid scaring the money back into people's pockets, so their audience increasingly chooses to draw a less bridled infusion of energy and spirit from the past. Homebrew software may be freely available, but it more importantly represents freedom – something of which there's ever-decreasing evidence among commercial developers. Its appeal, in this sense, runs far deeper than surface nostalgia.

That's one argument – one viable explanation for what happened to the Xbox and for what is now transforming the PSP. But what of the other renowned scenes: Dreamcast and GP32, for example? Another explanation might be that as reassuring, demonstrative elements of our individual gaming DNA, vintage games and customisation are key components in the personalisation of our technology. A PSP? Anyone can have one of those. *Ridge Racers*? Everyone that doesn't have it has likely played it. The contents of the 'Game' folder on your Memory Stick, however – now you're becoming interesting. There's great truth behind J Allard's vision of a 'remix generation' – the old outlets for personal expression have, indeed, become so inherently homogenous that only by applying some kind of signature to them can gamers at large have a voice. What he doesn't realise, however, is that those signatures can't be mass produced and marketed any more than modern technology can, with all its overarching power, be restrained.





As both the growth and interest curves of the Xbox scene – undoubtedly the most prolific of any console – peter out at an unprecedented high, so its community of techno-prospectors is beginning a migration, together with a previously aloof eastern contingent, to the next frontier. Even compared to their PC forefather, console scenes have profoundly evolved (except, some would argue, in their etiquette), developing a ravenous appetite and aptitude for progress that beggars belief. The PSP scene, accordingly, is moving with momentous pace. The many news sites that have appeared to catalogue its progress are updated incessantly, their speculative filler being steadily replaced by valid reconnaissance of the latest ports, updates and releases.

Beyond this efficiency, little else is surprising given the circumstances. While the suggestion of the 'iPod killer' is preposterous, Sony's machine being as untailored for convenient music playback as any other games machine, the phrase 'Xbox in your pocket' (a moniker Gizmondo has been only too happy to self-apply) describes perfectly the creature that PSP is fast becoming. For emulation, specifically, it represents the latest (and potentially greatest) iteration in the cycle.

"I expected that many emulators could be created," says **Mirakichi**, one of the scene's prolific Japanese coders and author of the RIN Game Boy emulator, "but I'm extremely surprised with how quickly the analysis of PSP's functionality has advanced in the small amount of time between the 'Hello World' release and now." Since that crucial shard of unsigned code – an innocuously displayed string of enormous significance – was presented to the world, an era's worth of emulated hardware and games have been delivered to a burgeoning community.

"I started playing around with PSP," says **Nem**, author of 'Hello World', "when the 'fake updater' app was discovered. I first tried to reverse engineer it but without significant result. I proceeded to read the firmware in the flash chip on the PSP mainboard, but still it wasn't enough. At around that time, there was a post on ps2dev.org regarding running ELF binaries on PSP 1.00. From there, I needed only a few days to show something on the screen, and a few more days to brush up the code."

Mere weeks later, highly playable, almost perfect emulators exist replicating systems such as the NES, Game Boy, Master System, Mega Drive, SNES, Amiga, WonderSwan and PC Engine, the last of which has arguably validated the entire movement with near-perfect handheld versions of *R-Type* (let's dwell no longer on the disastrous GBA sprite-ripped version of *R-Type III*), *Devil Crash* and *Dracula X*. Yes, the PC Engine GT has been here before, but never with such vibrancy and never without devouring whole battery sandwiches in prohibitively gluttonous sittings. The very latest Neo-Geo CD emulator, furthermore, offers fullscreen, sound-enabled emulation for practically every game released fo that system, its only demand being the need fo a larger Memory Stick – which is, for many, an already essential purchase.

What PSP shares with Xbox and Dreamcast i a capacity for rekindling the flame of emulation for renewal. Where those machines provided th means by which to enjoy emulated games without fuss, via a television rather than a monitor, so PSP's screen – less eye-candy than eye-caviar – adds portability to the equation without the customary hit in fidelity. Games tha in many cases, only retain their appeal in the smallest of doses can now be enjoyed in suitabl fleeting pockets of time. With its full power exploited (see 'The Hertz locker'), the handheld' hardware loadout is not only more auspicious than that of its rivals and forebears, but is critically powerful enough to follow through on the handheld emulation dream without stalling midway to deliver some dispiriting caveat.

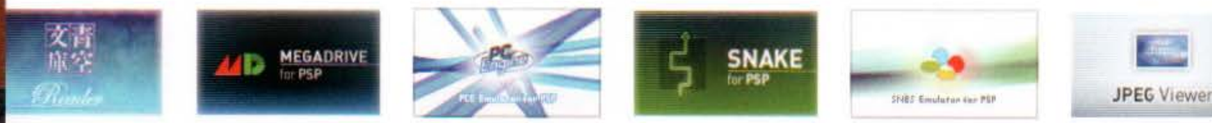
As with any such scene, the ready availabilit of the PSP's homebrew apps fosters demand fo the exponential distribution of its accompanyin tools. The pairing of home PC and console is now less a privilege than a procedure – cheap peripherals, broadband infrastructures and file-distribution networks joining hands to pipe authoring software directly to those with even a passing interest. To discover just what kind of work has been required thus far, we approache a scene figure who'll be familiar to many. "Sinc the PSP is fairly new hardware," says **Lantus**, a Xbox scene luminary, "there's still a lot of research going into 'reversing' the API and working out the system function calls. That said the original code of most ports is fairly simple to bring across. The hardware-specific routines, however, such as rendering to the framebuffer, sound, file IO and, of course, registering gamepad input, all need to be looked at.

"My history as a homebrew developer bega on the Xbox," he recalls. "I was so intrigued when I saw a port of MAME running on the hardware that I decided to port the fantastic





The porting of SCUMMVM (here running the now-freeware *Beneath A Steel Sky*) represents one of the PSP scene's proudest achievements



SNES emulator, xSnes9x. Since then, I've worked on a wide range of Xbox software, peaking at Surreal 64 – an N64 emulator based on three separate cores to provide a high level of compatibility for end users. Having dabbled in some GameCube homebrew, I ultimately moved to PSP where I'm now concentrating my efforts."

What spurs homebrew developers, we ask? Is there an element of insurgence against the manufacturer in this hobby of unlocking a machine's full potential? "It's definitely not a rebellion against Sony," he replies. "Really, it's purely to do my bit for the scene and bring some smiles to end-users' faces. I'm involved in homebrew simply because I know I'll enjoy playing my emulator ports and that others will as well." Are there aspects of Sony's release strategy, dictated as it has been by equal amounts of intent and circumstance, that have unwittingly fostered this growth in alternatively authored and distributed software? Mirakichi responds: "It was wonderful that Sony had such a high release volume at such a low hardware price, but while introducing their first entry into portable gaming using existing PlayStation licences was a strong fighting plan, the initial hardware difficulties and lack of flavour in the initial software line-up have created a problem."

In light of homebrew's proven appeal, then, and its voracious appetite, would the manufacturers be wise to pursue a business model that coupled legitimised hobbyist development with regular commercial releases, enabling them to harness both markets and perhaps gain more control over consumers' use of hardware? Mirakichi believes they would. "Sony released the Net Yaroze and PS2Linux development kits for home PS2 users," he says, "and I'm hoping they'll release something similar for PSP. As for the business of emulation, it can preserve and protect previous assets, so it's a positive thing. I'm looking forward to the first download service for Nintendo's Revolution." Codemasters' **David Brickley**, development manager of the company's PSP adaptations of its TOCA and Colin McCrae franchises, has a more measured response. "Legitimise it," he claims, "and some of the appeal would disappear. At that point the homebrew scene would have to start adhering to Sony's submissions policies – concept approval, technical checklist requirements – the same as everyone else does, so Sony would have to staff those departments with additional QAs. Right now, they are already swamped with developers wanting to make games for them, and they have a way of limiting those numbers by ensuring they control the media it runs on. From Sony's point of view, there's just too much to do for too little gain to change that."

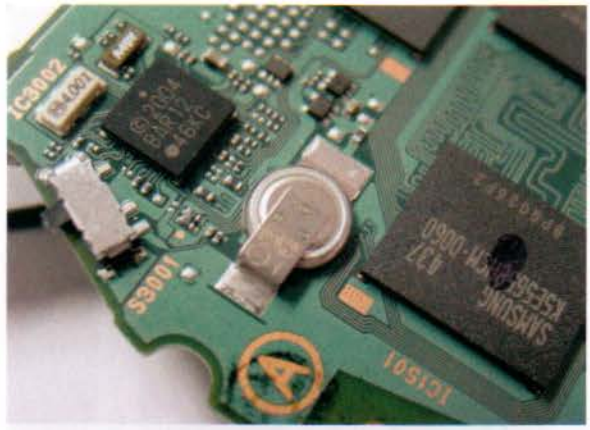
In a community where recompense is practically non-existent, and seldom expected, there's little reason to doubt the benevolent outlook of developers like Lantus and Mirakichi. It's a shame, though, that their passion must weave so regularly into the path of the law. Every time the sun rises for homebrew, we must recalibrate our ideas of where its shadowy grey market eventually becomes black.

"IT'S DEFINITELY NOT A REBELLION AGAINST SONY. REALLY, IT'S PURELY TO DO MY BIT FOR THE SCENE AND BRING SOME SMILES TO END-USERS' FACES"

The most questionable of PSP's emulators, without doubt, is the experimental Visual Boy Advance – a GBA emulator that, if it reaches playable speeds (its accuracy otherwise being exemplary), will immediately begin siphoning the lifeblood from Sony's chief handheld competitor. It's still a fledgling product, just as the precise application of PSP's 2D hardware acceleration to emulation remains untested. But at a time when Nintendo will be keenly pushing Game Boy Micro, the news that the machine's entire library of respected, bankable games is illegally enjoyable on a competing product will be news carried on a roll of thunder. The apparent irony of the potential situation – one machine gaining hardware proliferation at the expense of its competitor's software sales – won't gain the backstage appreciation from Sony that many in the scene would like to believe. For the manufacturer, every PSP sold is money lost, with profit reliant upon the games that homebrew does nothing to whisk from the shelves. As seen in the forced firmware updates of games such as *Intelligent License* and *Coded Arms*, the company isn't turning a blind eye.

THE HERTZ LOCKER

Sony's enforcement of a 222MHz cap on developers' use of the PSP CPU met with surprisingly stoic response from a community that, when previously faced with mischievous pixels and impotent batteries, marched with their pitchforks and flaming torches to beat upon the company gates. The underclock, it was claimed, would keep demanding titles like *Ridge Racers* from further bloating the machine's power requirements, at least until a more capable battery became available. Probably thanks to the strength of that game, the defence was upheld. Now, however, every emulator worth its salt has left both Sony's limit and its concerns behind, initially providing 333MHz support as an option tinted with cautionary red, but now affirmed by the lack of any apparent side effects.



CybBlade is a member of PSP-Dev, the Spanish group that first responded to the 1.5 firmware upgrade (installed as standard in all but the first Japanese machines) that split the homebrew community into haves and have-nots, defined by the privilege to either run unsigned code or merely watch from the sidelines. "We began when the 'Hello World' code was released," he reveals, "starting off by analysing ISOs by Paradox [some of the first UMD dumps to be, somewhat illegally, spread across the net]. We chose the PSP because it's powerful with pretty features, and because, only a few days after its release, there were already programs to manage and create videos for it. We were faced with a problem in that some of us had updated our consoles to 1.5, so in the last month it's been crucial to develop exploits such as Swaploit, KillerX and, only a week later, KXploit."

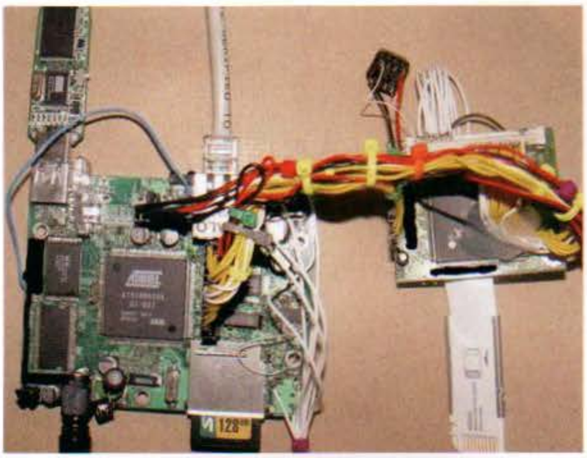
The last of these is the important one. The original Swaploit – a 1.5 firmware workaround demanding two Memory Sticks, good timing and inhuman patience – barely had time to disappoint before the near-transparent KXploit essentially buried the issue with as definitive a solution as could be hoped for. By this time, however, 1.51 and 1.52 firmware builds had

PSP scene artist Pochi has created a full suite of icons and backgrounds. It's without question some of the most exquisite hobbyist work we've seen



XECUTIVE BOARDS

Though the development side of any homebrew scene is typically conducted with utmost professionalism, there are few outfits with the proficiency and profile of Team Xecuter. Having tooled up a small army of Xbox owners with the means to enjoy umpteen media formats, swap video modes, efficiently reboot their machines and, of course, access a wealth of community-developed games and applications, the group has been piecing together some equally groundbreaking PSP hardware. Revealed in early July, the add-on (dev unit pictured below) promises to extend the machine's media support from the limited duo of UMD and Memory Stick to all manner of removable formats. The hardware is claimed to have enabled downgrading of PSP firmware, though Xecuter suggests this won't feature in the final build.



been made available to weld shut this chink in the armour. For those users that upgraded, and for everyone else once Sony's forced updates affect a game that people at large actually care about, it's back to the drawing board.

Will this become the template, we ask, for the battle between the makers and breakers of PSP's code? "There'll be a specific method devised for each firmware update," believes CybBlade, "until someone can discover a bug that Sony can't fix. Either that, or someone will develop a generic patcher that can do the job for us. I don't believe that a modchip will ever come to the PSP scene, but there are hardware mods that will be ready in the short term: a Memory Stick emulator, for instance, that can use a hard disk to store data."

Interestingly, it's likely that the homebrew scene, with its emulators and community apps, is safely positioned beyond Sony's foremost concerns. The problem is that while the scene is largely innocent in its desires, it certainly isn't inconsequential. As certain gates are opened, so a familiar shadow will slip in beneath the water. "Sadly," agrees Lantus, "it's inevitable that pirate games will eventually be run on any console. How locked-down the hardware is determines how widespread piracy will be. At some point the PSP will succumb, and it'll be a sad day for the scene when it happens."

This interview, you'll have guessed, was conducted mere moments before the day in question did then occur. Could better proof exist of this scene's momentum, in fact, than the arduous plate-spinning required to discuss it in terms that aren't redundant a second later? If this should be considered a snapshot of gaming's fastest movement, then you'll have to forgive the blur. The infrastructure of Xbox piracy culture, in a state of re-emergence the last time anyone blinked, is now bearing many a forbidden fruit on PSP. Like Dreamcast, Sony's machine can run unsigned code without need for perilous hardware modification. Applications sensitive enough to be outlawed from forums are emerging by the day – the SDK is one (the release of its Xbox equivalent having paved the way for much of its illegal, but nonetheless notable software), another is a UMD ripper that will dump the entire contents of a commercial game to Memory Stick in an easily distributable form. With that touchpaper set in place, the ignition is in the launcher – an app to successfully boot such imaged UMDs while redirecting their software's media calls to the Memory Stick rather than the optical drive.

In a world where hackers are seldom seen to lose, the difficulty of creating such an app has made its arrival all the more likely. As with the extension of Xbox and PS2 hard disk support, the undeniable benefits of running software from a faster, more energy-efficient source than a UMD have only bolstered demand, and there's little that benefits the hacking community more than the suggestion of legitimacy and acceptance. Already, there are ISO loaders for many games – inevitably, there will soon be one for all. With the struggle to run unsigned code on every PSP already seeing volleys fired over the battlefield of the machine's firmware, the advent of piracy and Sony's response will inevitably lead to war.

For the commercial sector, this brings a level of security into play that, as Sony becomes increasingly precautionary, will only increase. At Codemasters, the problem exists in nascent forms, but has yet to bloom into anything more intrusive. "For the time being, it's simply been limited to ensuring we're running the latest libraries and firmware," says Brickley. "We're managing to implement custom soundtracks in *TOCA: Race Driver 2*, so we know that even wit[h] the latest libraries we can still stream some media files from a Memory Stick and use them within a game. That opens up some nice potential for future products, like uploading yo[ur] pictures and using them in game, maybe.

"The biggest problem has simply been that we couldn't burn our own UMDs, which meant [a] heap of assumptions about what its performan[ce] would be until we saw one for ourselves. Hopefully in the future they'll release a burner for developers which emulates the performance if not the retail encryption method."

"I DON'T BELIEVE THAT A MODCHIP WILL EVER COME TO THE PSP SCENE, BUT THERE ARE HARDWARE MODS THAT WILL BE READY IN THE SHORT TERM"

Elsewhere, the Microsoft doctrine of damaging the appeal of piracy rather than its capacity has made considerable progress, but that model's unlikely to hold much ground on a machine with an online infrastructure as limited as the PSP's. **Clayton Clark**, webmaster and founder of the site PSP Updates (formerly PSP Hacker), assures us, however, that while piracy may be inevitable, it's far from being the driving force behind most of what we've seen so far.

"We'll have absolutely nothing to do with piracy," Clark says of the site. "There's something very human, very logical and intellectual about hacking. It takes a creative an[d] free-thinking mind – the spirit that PSP Updates







celebrates. We have no problems with Sony, and in fact we're having talks with them about receiving games and press kits for previews." **Ruka** – another Japanese coder behind the Nester J NES emulator – concurs: "It's mainly an issue concerning an individual user's morals. If my work ever began to infringe copyrights, I would remove myself from PSP development."

Every community needs an assembly point, and though it performs a task shared by many and attracts a variety of opinion, PSP Updates maintains prominence. When regular end-users seek their fix, and when those vocal within the community seek a soapbox, they typically pay a visit. When New Line Cinema, tellingly, made public its intention to release movie trailers specifically encoded for PSP, it followed suit. PSP Updates has become the unspoken HQ for the western scene, and is fast experiencing everything that implies – repetitions of the same question, rivers of gossip that routinely burst their banks into wild speculation, and ethical battles destined to remain forever unresolved.

"The forums were very hectic at first," says Clark of the aftermath of KXploit's release. "We had over a thousand new members a day for the first few days, and they all had questions. The forums were packed with pleas for help – it was crazy. I owe a huge thanks to my moderators who spent countless hours a day providing answers. When it exploded like that, we immediately knew it was time to write the UFAQ (Ultimate Homebrew Guide/FAQ). Right now we have over 10,000 registered users and the UFAQ has been viewed 28,000 times."

And how, we ask, is a site run by and for hobbyists handling such a tide? "Our files section alone," Clark reveals, "contains over 500 files and is serving nearly 100Gb of them each day. While I don't have the exact numbers handy, I'd estimate 150Gb a day and growing for the whole site. Although we hate them too, we've implemented Google ads, some pop-ups and some clickthroughs to help alleviate costs. We're actually running at a slight loss right now."

Monetary cost isn't the only cloud that'll long hang over PSPUpdates and its ilk. In a crowded arena such as the web, a catch-all site such as this can't afford to be selective in its reportage – not without opening the door for others to steal the limelight. Though it stands by the common policy of limiting piracy coverage to news rather than actual file hosting, the daily reiteration of its anti-piracy values will never be enough to satisfy all. Nonetheless, the site now has a fixed place in a variously poised network that includes more specifically oriented alternatives (the PSP arm of the PS2-Dev forums, for example). This place, sizeable and all encompassing, is one where the court of public opinion will always be in session.

From this most potent springboard, then, where can we expect to see the PSP scene flatten out? Will there be a point months, weeks, days or even hours from now where we again find ourselves reflecting on how one night's pipedream became the next morning's reality?

"One thing I've learned from Xbox homebrew," says Lantus, "is to never say never. Some optimisation methods are required to get most 16bit emulators running at good framerates with sound. It's time-consuming but certainly achievable. N64 and most 32bit emulators, however, will be a lot trickier, though I'm not saying impossible. For N64 to work, for example, would require the PSP's 3D API to be exposed – it would be pointless to use software rendering methods to emulate graphics API, HLE [High Level Emulation] methods and/or dynamic recompilation. But this functionality requires memory, and lots of it. The PSP has very limited main memory. I don't know if it would all quite work, but I wouldn't be surprised if we saw someone running *Mario 64* on their PSP." Mirakichi's hopes are set similarly high. "Even though it's difficult," he adds, "there is the possibility of a PlayStation emulator."

As is its way, the PSP scene has already mounted the first rung of this next speculative ladder before its other foot has even finished nestling into yesterday's breakthrough. The hardware stretching that brings fullscreen visuals to the latest Neo-Geo CD emulator has driven an elusive wedge into the doors of the PSP GPU, and by the time you read this, the odds are that a succession of others will have dismantled what remains of the barrier. As to what the step beyond, or the step beyond that will see achieved: anything is probable.



Hobbyists have brought *Beats Of Rage* and its mods from PC to PSP. It's cute code, but far from legal

Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Now playing

Metal Slug



It's ironic that it takes an emulated game nearly ten years old to bring out the best in the PSP's screen: bright, dense and detailed, *Metal Slug* has never looked this good.
NEO GEO CD (PSP), SNK

Wipeout Pure



As a third Gamma wave radiates from Sony's radio headquarters, so we continue to swoop through the blinding blasts and explosive light of the anti-gravity comeback tour.
PSP, SCEA

Bomberman DS



A bus journey and a game among four DS owners is enough to reinforce the value of yet another handheld update that works.
DS, HUDSON SOFT

Think of the children

Why Jack Thompson shouldn't play Chibi Robo



***Gregory Horror Show* is perhaps the best example of a growing trend: games which mix kid appeal with dark, sinister content**

Just when it seemed that the *GTA: San Andreas* controversy cycle had run its course, US politicians got wind of the Hot Coffee mod, which unlocks sexual content Rockstar is adamant it never meant the public to see. Senator Hilary Clinton has called for an enquiry into why the game, which has a 17s-and-over-only M rating, wasn't given the more restrictive AO rating. The ESRB is also investigating. It's an interesting conundrum – should Rockstar be held accountable for material that it is impossible to view if the game is used as intended? But what's more interesting is a different trend: if you want to include truly mature content in your game, your best plan is to aim it at children.

Chibi Robo, despite its sugar-coated style – has a brutally bleak heart. The relationship between the mother and the father of the family has disintegrated to the point that they never speak to each other: the father slouched all day and all night on the couch, the young daughter distressed to the point of near catatonia. No one ever leaves the house, a drifting tide of junk-food wrappers the only thing that changes in their world. It sounds more like a précis for a Todd Solondz movie than a starting point for a sprinkle of Nintendo magic.

Minna Daisuki Katamari Damacy is no nicer. Its flashbacks tell the tale of the King of All Cosmos' upbringing, revealing the cruelty and parental abuse which lead him to mature into such a mercurial father figure. His violent disappointment is hard to bear when you fail a level – harder still when you apply some basic psychoanalysis to what triggers his rage. It may be played for laughs, but there's no denying the basic darkness of his story. Even the 1950s charm of the schoolboy Tony Tough (previewed on page 40) hides some of the most mature wit found in any modern videogame.

It's the contrast between the sweetness of the presentation and the sour saltiness of the content that makes these games so appealing, and it's that contrast that makes these themes possible: presented with gritty realism they would be an unappealing – and possibly uncertifiable – prospect. Long may they continue to fly under Mrs Clinton's radar.



Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



CHIBI ROBO

FORMAT: GC PRICE: ¥5,800 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), TBC (UK) PUBLISHER: NINTENDO
DEVELOPER: SKIP PREVIOUSLY IN: E124, E144, E152

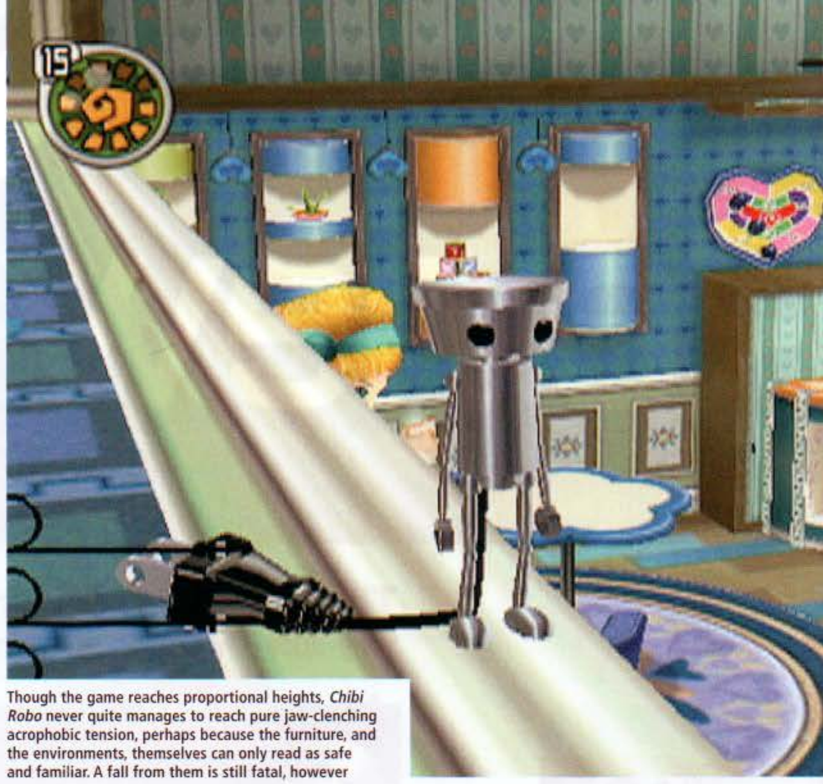




Though cutscenes by and large provide ample enough visual cues to underscore your next goal, some of the challenges could leave less fluent importers resorting to bouts of trial and error

It's amazing what a little shift in perspective can do. Were any other game to propose that your primary goals consisted of picking up an endless supply of garbage for a relentlessly untidy family, or scrubbing crayon marks from their carpet with a toothbrush, one might be tempted to baulk at the entertainment value of such quotidian tasks (see *Shenmue*'s infamous forklift sections). Do so through the eyes and servos of a ten-centimetre robot, though, and it's near instantly transformed into a fascinating pursuit. The scale's the thing, and *Chibi Robo* surely isn't the first to exploit it – *Toy Commander*, *Mister Mosquito* and *Boku Wa Chiisai* have all blazed the trail before – but until now none has managed to create as engaging a world around the perspective.

Assuring her somewhat disingenuously that this is in fact what she'd always wanted, Papa, the unemployed and unrepentantly young-at-heart head of the Sanderson household, presents Robo as a birthday gift to his daughter Jenny. Straight out of the box, he's little more than glorified ambulatory Dustbuster – able to easily navigate beneath furniture and in hard-to-reach areas to clear out discarded candy wrappers and cookie crumbs – and so promptly sets to work within his meagre means in order to accomplish his sole advertised directive: spreading happiness however possible throughout his owner's household.

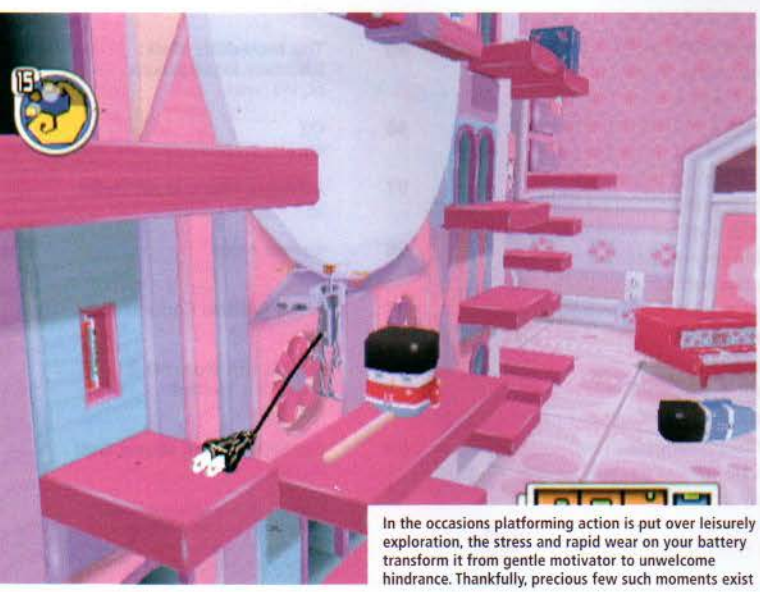


Though the game reaches proportional heights, *Chibi Robo* never quite manages to reach pure jaw-clenching acrophobic tension, perhaps because the furniture, and the environments, themselves can only read as safe and familiar. A fall from them is still fatal, however

Though the Sandersons allow Robo free run of the house, from the start you're necessarily limited by his basic-level battery, which dictates that you never stray from within eyeshot of an outlet for a quick recharge, and by a day/night cycle that gives the game its primary chapter-like pacing and structure, and also its main motivation, forcing prioritisation to make the most of the time allotted. Performing tasks and achieving goals rewards quantifiable happiness points, which are stored until the end of the time period and are uploaded to Robo's home computer, which propel him up the ranks toward the ultimate title, Super Chibi Robo, and which grant extended battery charges. Robo's also not above pilfering pocket change he finds lying around the house, which allows him to purchase upgrades and to triple the time allowed for each cycle.

Nearly every inch of the Sandersons' richly detailed house is waiting to be scaled, mounted and conquered, all by means of their basic nature

It's then that you begin to truly appreciate just how massive and complex Robo's world is. Nearly every inch of the Sandersons' richly detailed house is waiting to be scaled, mounted and conquered, all by means of their very basic nature. Every dangling shoestring from a carelessly disregarded pair of shoes on an entranceway chair, every fortuitously placed push-pin on the living room corkboard and every progressively larger kitchen spice jar provides Robo an opportunity to forage ever higher and deeper into every long-forgotten nook of the house. A large part of *Chibi Robo*'s joy lies simply here – in the pure pleasure of spotting a seemingly insurmountable area and working your way across impossible expanses of room until you reach it, and the game does a masterful job of managing these ever-widening concentric circles of exploration and allowing you new ways to reach new



In the occasions platforming action is put over leisurely exploration, the stress and rapid wear on your battery transform it from gentle motivator to unwelcome hindrance. Thankfully, precious few such moments exist













Modern living



Though born of a more traditional point-and-click background, *Chibi Robo's* transformation into 3D brought with it all of the trappings of modern videogaming. Its day/night cycle perfectly divides the flow into bite-sized chapters, each cycle providing some semblance of progress, even if it's just a few coins. Punishment is lax, as well – the game does away with Game Over screens and simply returns you to the Chibi House if your battery runs dry, and there's no quest in the game that can't be finished if you run out of time in the middle. Every character stays in their current state-loop until you finish the event that progresses the story. It's a game that constantly rewards, and rarely frustrates.



Every one of Chibi Robo's actions has a distinct musical reaction, from footsteps (a different instrument per floor surface) to his toothbrush sweeper. It's done subtly enough that without paying special attention you might not realise that the simple course of your play is creating melody



heights in old grounds with further time, a stronger battery and better tools earned throughout the game.

But where other games may have been satisfied to stop here, *Chibi Robo's* exploration and simple domestic tasks prove themselves the least of the game's actual concerns. In your travels you'll stumble upon and unfold an intricately spun web of character interactions, warmly drawn personalities every bit as rewarding to explore as the physical environments themselves, and Robo will find himself not simply an automaton servant but also diplomat and intermediary. As you'll soon find out, the placid atmosphere of the Sanderson home is a veneer thinly veiling massive marital tension: Mama nearing her breaking point toward Papa's reluctance to do anything but spend his day watching superhero robot cartoons and spend the family's dwindling savings on manga, toys and other self-serving frivolities like Robo himself. Jenny reacts to the tension by donning a frog-hat and refusing to speak other than croaking 'ribbit' except to confide in Robo, in true child-therapy form, in the thirdperson through her teddy. The bear, along with all the other toys in the house, eventually reveals an interrelated storyline.

What may seem like needless exposition here is actually quite to the point: *Chibi Robo* does little new, but what it does it does right. True to its original point-and-click design, *Chibi Robo* is a classic adventure with the added bonus of nearly a second game's worth of thirdperson exploration. The many months of the game's delay and near death seem to have given it ample opportunity to push itself further and provide layer upon layer, and thread after ancillary thread, of polish and content which strike the perfect balance between gameplay and storytelling, a story – of which we've barely scratched the surface here – which is unexpectedly a good deal darker and more dense than its primary-coloured, Toy Story appearance would have you believe. Its value and achievement lay not in how it brings revolutionary and innovative mechanics to an old genre, but in how it uses simplicity and economy as well as seamlessly blending outside constructs, to achieve a higher form of the genre. **[8]**





Robo's retail packaging doubles as his home base, complete with plug for nightly recharges and happiness drops, a PC that also serves as upgrade shop, and a scrap metal recycler for building helper items



MINNA DAISUKI KATAMARI DAMACY

FORMAT: **PLAYSTATION 2** PRICE: **¥4,980 (£25)**
RELEASE: **OUT NOW (JP), TBC (UK)** PUBLISHER: **NAMCO**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E150**





This time, the interface drops the repeated spherical theme of the first and presents itself as a scrolling progression of 2D scenery. As you get further into the game and the field becomes more populated, each of the fans clamour over one another for your attention

Katamari Damacy has found itself in the peculiar and highly estimable position of near unanimous and unassailable praise. Casuals love it because it has stripped itself to the bare essentials, and is instantly playable the moment you lay your hands on it. Developers and industry professionals love it because it has almost singularly proven that high concept games with no proven IP still have a chance at capturing a significant market. Designers love it for its signature style; musicians love it for its unforgettable soundtrack. Academics and ludologists love it for eschewing the formulaic Hollywood model and revelling in its very videogameness, and lifelong gamers love it for reminding us why we love games, of a less cynical time when it seemed every game promised something wholly original and anything was possible. It brings out in everyone who touches it that sense of solitary personal discovery, like coming across the hopelessly obscure band that you're positive are singing to you alone, and that no one could possibly appreciate as much as you do, even if fully aware of the plain truth that everybody loves *Katamari Damacy*.

Katamari's developers are of course keenly aware of their accomplishment as well, and rather than play up and exploit their own successes have channeled every bit of personal pride and possible swollen ego through their character, the King of All Cosmos. *Minna Daisuki*'s premise is a retelling of actual events – a game based on the events of the original has found itself garnering worldwide acclaim, and thus fans have gathered to meet the King and ask if he and the Prince might perform personal junk-gathering favours. This twist of meta-events serves a number of functions. First, it not only provides a tidy structure for unveiling new quests this time around, but also neatly sidesteps and heads off any possible criticisms that could have been levied had the game simply provided a rehashed storyline in which to embed another round of precisely the same gameplay as the first, in effect saying: 'We're doing this again because the fans (those both in-game and out) have asked it of us'. Most importantly, it gives the team a chance to develop ideas left out of the original so as not to dilute its concept.





Each level opens with a question-and-answer session between the King and his fans, giving them the chance to exhalt him for his demonstrable style and super-coolness

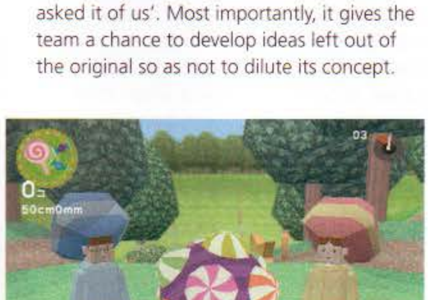
> Minna Daisuki is not so much Katamari Damacy version 1.5 as it is the Katamari remix album, bringing freshness to the old standards

Accordingly, *Minna Daisuki* is not so much *Katamari Damacy* version 1.5 as it is the *Katamari* remix album, bringing freshness to the old standards, and giving players a chance to try out their skills in new ways. This time around, you're not simply trying to beat the clock to reach a determined size or number of objects, though through the course of the game you'll do plenty of both, but performing more thematic feats for a variety of characters. Leaving the katamari aside and rolling a 98lb weakling through a succession of foods to fatten him to the level of sumo champion, running laps through an F1 course at five times your normal speed, or feeding a flaming katamari with a stream of flammable objects to light a campsite fire are precisely the sorts of memorable new life that *Minna Daisuki* needed to stave off the retread doldrums. Yet at no point during the game's life are you left with the sensation that you've done this all before.

The challenge this time around is somewhat lessened, your katamari



Twoplayer competitive mode makes a return, and is joined by a coop mode in which each player takes the equivalent control of one analogue stick. It's a true test of your communicative and psychic abilities

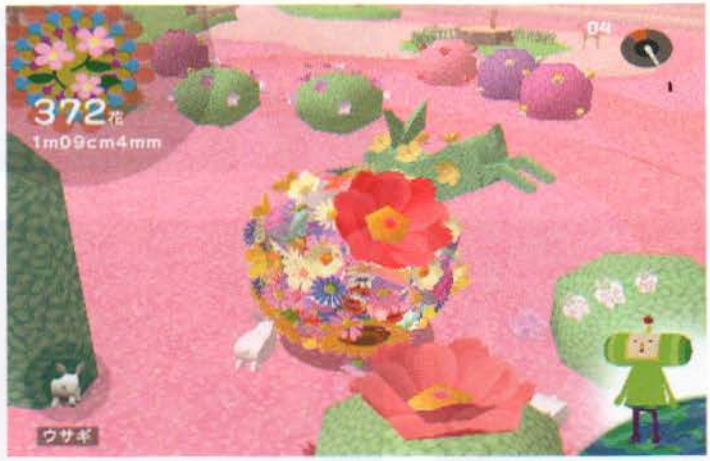






A just-this-side-of-sinister subplot tells of the King's childhood and teenage years, his abusive father's breakdowns and, more pleasantly, his formative years with the Prince's mother







rolling much more smoothly, with objects situating themselves much more perfectly, the pace stepped up slightly and, though the credit roll can be reached by the dedicated over the course of a day, *Minna Daisuki* places much more of an emphasis on collection and replay than the original. Every stage has a secondary purpose, or Challenge mode, and the prince's cousins, hidden throughout, are placed so that levels must be visited multiple times to collect all that there is to be collected. Where the first felt truly conquered once you'd reached the end, Namco this time has ensured that there's reason to return.

Minna Daisuki is brimming with self-assuredness both in its characterisations and its functionality, and measures its pace and progression with an ever more aggressively beautiful interface and environment design, capturing even more galactic and universal scale than the original. As a sequel, it knows its task is to entertain both newcomers and diehard fans of the original equally, and it does so with the confidence of a team that knows precisely the strengths of its winning formula and, for everybody that already loves *Katamari Damacy*, how the formula can be improved. **[8]**

The racetrack level proves satisfying both in the steady burst of additional speed that it grants and with the repetitive nature of each lap highlighting your progressive growth. No need to outrace your opponents when you can simply consume them







Songs of the Sphere



No mention of *Katamari Damacy* would be complete without an examination of its music. *Minna Daisuki's* soundtrack brings together a new batch of hipster Japanese popstars such as Kahimi Karie and mouth-instrumentalist Dokaka, here doing a beatbox a cappella version of the original theme. Overall, the new tracks struggle to compete with the inescapably catchy and highly hummable up-tempo songs from the first, except when they directly refer to them. One such track, played during a zoo-themed level, features a chorus of various domestic and safari animals singing a medley of the first *Katamari's* tunes.



WORLD OF WARCRAFT

FORMAT: MAC, PC PRICE: £30 (£9 PER MONTH SUBSCRIPTION)
RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: VIVENDI DEVELOPER: BLIZZARD
PREVIOUSLY IN: E138, E140, E148, E152

Basic training



In *World Of WarCraft*, players must choose a fixed server, a faction (Horde or Alliance – there is no communication possible between the two), a race (four for each faction) and a class. Classes define your role in the game's combat and to some extent your appearance, and are unchangeable. While some players ultimately regret the choice they made, and some classes are more useful than others at the 'end-game' stage reached at the level 60 experience cap, all are viable as solo classes and all have distinctive pleasures. Each class has three traits which players can chose to specialise in, and a range of crafting professions offer further customisation. Combat can be as simplistic as toggling the attack button and waiting for your enemy to die, or elaborate enough to benefit from interface modifications, hand-written macros and the scholarly digestion of pages of tactical advice. Quests, however, have little variation, almost always requiring you to go somewhere, kill a lot of things and come back. The sumptuous world is continuous, with almost no load screens, and must be traversed in realtime by players, whose grumbles at the time involved are balanced by their feelings of immersion and exploration.





The recent release of the Battlegrounds patch was the long-awaited moment when *World Of WarCraft* reached maturity. Offering access to intense, complex battles, with 80 players and dozens of NPCs, this was the feature that was designed to deliver on the game's ambitious name. Playing it, you live the experience of the troops you commanded from afar in the *WarCraft* RTS games. Horde and Alliance face off across the frontline, old racial hatreds simmering in their blood. Hungry for victory, they're also hungry for each other's deaths, eager to harvest teeth, hooves and spines for personal rewards. Combat is dynamic and complex, an ocean of strategy and in-depth knowledge sustaining a firestorm of snap decisions and quick-fingered manoeuvring. The majestic beauty of the setting adds to the potency of the atmosphere. 'This is our land', both sides think. 'We will not permit defeat'. Battlegrounds was the crucial missing component of *WarCraft*, something whose implementation was supposed to form a whole it was appropriate to judge. Playing it now, however, it turns out to be a microcosm of the game as a whole: extraordinary, exceptional, flawed.



Although *WOW* has only a limited number of options in its character-creation tool, most players feel a strong sense of individuality within the game. Wearing clothes and armour crafted by friends adds powerfully to the sense of uniqueness



The 'end-game', reached when players hit the level 60 experience cap, is dominated by raid parties – 40-strong groups which have to learn new, sophisticated fighting patterns to take on *WOW*'s toughest instance bosses

There are flaws on every level of *World Of WarCraft*. The most high profile have been those in the infrastructure. Long teething troubles caused by the unprecedented success of the game meant that for many months servers were overloaded and unreliable. Even now, with Battlegrounds, the queue systems and the instanced warzones themselves are periodically offine. There are bugs – inevitable in a project of this size, but intensely frustrating to players putting in a level of time and money to the game which magnifies even tiny splinters into side-gouging thorns. There are game structure issues which may never be addressed: will players of substantially different levels ever be able to play together meaningfully? How can the war players are supposed to be crafting ever feel fair when Alliance players often outnumber Horde three to one? Then there is a sense that even Blizzard's rapidly expanding staff can't quite meet the scale of the project they've embarked on: quests that shriek placeholder and stories that peter out. There are thousands upon thousands of complaints, from unfounded, petty carping to substantial and serious criticisms.

Nor is it that Blizzard has failed to address these complaints. Throughout the game's life, it's been running to catch up with itself. Major introductions, like the Honour system, have been tooled to restructure the biggest problem areas, and yet each of these has









WOW's driving force is the sense of exploration: finding new areas and experiencing them at different times of day is a constant pleasure throughout the hundreds of hours many players spend in the world



Although there is one full-scale Battleground available for top-level players, the rest of *WOW*'s inhabitants have to make do with a ten-on-ten version of Capture The Flag. It brings a real freshness and variety to the combat, but is slightly awkwardly implemented, undermining its tactical challenge. Although the best experience often comes from entering as a team, the very long queues call for a hefty committment



been as ambitious but as flawed as the original. Honour initially worsened many of the PvP issues it was hoped it would solve. Battlegrounds only really offers the full scale of the experience to the highest level of players, and hasn't resolved many concerns such as the even-handed reward of damage classes and support classes. There's no doubt Blizzard will continue to work to overhaul the problem areas, and to continually advance and embellish the rest of the game, but most players have now come to expect the two-steps-forward, one-step-back results of their efforts.

But here's the remarkable thing: it doesn't matter. You could write a book (and some disgruntled *WOW* fans more or less have) about what's wrong with the game, and you wouldn't come close to expressing what's important about it. It's a game designed to exhaust the world's supply of adjectives. It's a world littered with riches – tiny details sewn into a vast, varied and utterly spectacular canvas. The specific shortcomings of the game's mechanical structure become immaterial in an environment that grants the player such endless potential for exploration and experimentation. Self-imposed quests and self-regulated cooperation take *WOW*'s treasury of raw materials and hew from them a new structure and a new focus. Guilds cooperate on months of epic efforts just to make their members a new kind of bag. Days of planning go into braving the divide and escorting a player of the rival faction through hostile territories. New exchange rates spring up, specialisations are formed, reputations are made. The game's world becomes the player's world.

It's simple arithmetic that wins out in the end. For every flaw there are two dozen flares of brilliance: in the characterisation and the game balancing, in the innovations that challenge the stultified assumptions of the MMO genre, in the aesthetics and the atmosphere, in the magnificent music, in the flexibility of solo and party play. For all its problems, this is a game of rare and wonderful accomplishments, a creative vision that has a completeness and a rigour few can match. Tens of thousands of decisions have been made which strengthen the game; tens of thousands of those decisions have been implemented with extraordinary skill and flair. But in the end, the hallmark of a great game isn't in its spec sheet or its design document. It's in its players' eyes and in their faces as they tell you of adventures past and planned, of encounters unexpected and unforgettable. Of moments of slapstick and cunning, of preposterous victories pulled from the jaws of dumb cowardice, of noble defeats slammed in the face of dogged determination, of warm camaraderie and of intrepid solitude. In the end, it's not its sales figures that make *World Of WarCraft* a true phenomenon. **[9]**

> It's a game designed to exhaust the world's supply of adjectives. It's a world littered with riches – tiny details sewn into a vast, spectacular canvas



Travel between *WOW*'s two continents is by zeppelin or boat, providing both spectacle and a rare chance for loading



GENJI

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,500 (£30)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JPN), AUGUST 30 (US), TBC (UK)
PUBLISHER: SCEI DEVELOPER: GAME REPUBLIC





Precious stones are hidden in the levels, trios of which can be used to upgrade stats. They're found by slashing at the scenery, and are given away by a glowing jewel on the character's hip and the quickening rumble in the joypad

It's just too hard to shake the sensation of *Onimusha*-inspired deja vu during the opening moments of *Genji*. So much, you think, for the creative independence Yoshiki Okamoto earned himself when he left Capcom to found Game Republic: its inaugural title is just another oriental swords'n'sorcery adventure. But, soon into *Genji*'s opening salvo of easy tutorial battles, something curious happens: a seemingly simple sword attack from the player somehow evolves into a crushing technique, as the gameworld greys and slows, and initial playable character Yoshitsune preempts his would-be attacker with a blow that cuts him – and maybe a nearby foe or two – down in one. And it's no a fluke: it soon becomes clear that there's scope for tremendous counter manoeuvres, and that timing them is tempting but tricky. Shades of *Onimusha* again, then.

But not much later, *Genji*'s pivotal mechanism reveals itself. The Mind's Eye function – a segmented special-power bar that's nourished by combat – slows time and resets enemies into a neutral position, causing them to launch fresh attacks



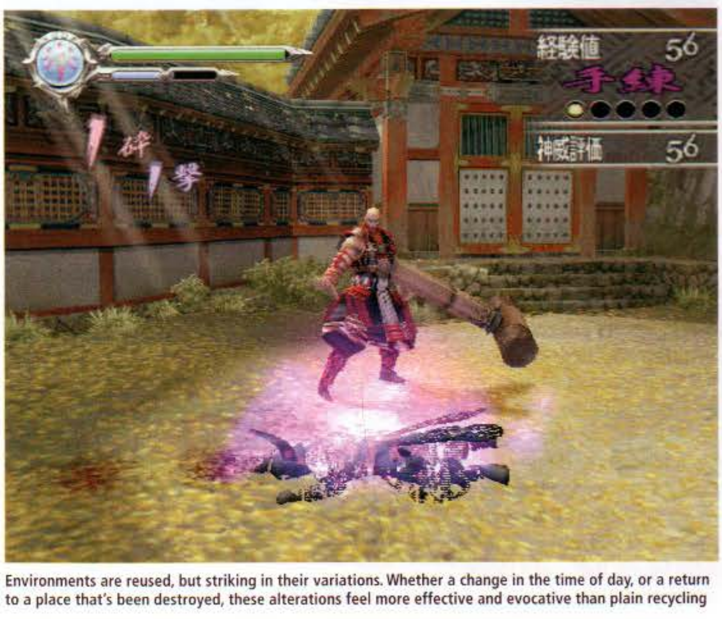
Enemies are suitably offensive for a game focused so strongly on the art of counterattacking, and rarely dawdle in their bids to surround the player and inflict choreographed damage. Even projectiles, from archers and spellcasters, can be returned to sender with graceful and deadly effect

accompanied by button prompts that explicitly inform the player how to execute some devastating parries and swipes – not so much a smart bomb as a smart sword. Successful completion of a series of such kills is rewarded by a silky, pretty flourish, not unlike *Shinobi*'s Tate system.

The Mind's Eye is something more than snazzy get-out clause, however – it's also a stepping stone whose timings, once instinctive, come into play outside of this slow-mo mode. Before long, you'll find yourself able to one-hit-kill groups of enemies with sly and gratifying grace.

Many games feature both breakneck, high risk/reward counter timings and an accessible tight-spot method for clearing crowds, but leave little leeway in between to learn. This means this crucial process is often





Environments are reused, but striking in their variations. Whether a change in the time of day, or a return to a place that's been destroyed, these alterations feel more effective and evocative than plain recycling



left open only to those with bullish determination and a fetish for flair, but what *Genji* offers is a system of fluid improvement

It's also one whose timings feel so sensible and well-honed that they eventually train the player in intuition, too; in general combat, using them in realtime becomes no so much a case of deliberately visualising a prompt appearing as just striking at the moment that *feels* critical. It turns battles into engaging, quickdraw showdowns as the lure of applying methods mastered in the nursery of Mind's Eye mode becomes something more exciting and skilful.

Don't be mistaken, however. The Mind's Eye feature isn't a system by which the playe could steamroller through the game, as the timings for certain opponents require true muscle memory and reflex. Boss encounters – which are common – are perhaps where the system requires a more unwelcoming precision, as the timing demands are higher and there's little luxury of being able to practise as you can during repeated fights against standard enemies. Outside of this, though, bosses in general are relatively relaxed, defeated with lots of simple attacks and a pocketful of healing items, a welcome departure from the terrorists that make up the unflinching, stressmongering encounters of many Japanese action games.

While *Genji*'s not as raw and raucous as the PS2's other recent combat epic *God Of*



War, it's just as richly pretty, albeit somewhat subdued. But unlike that game, players who want to get by just by lashing out with strings of flailing attacks with little finesses will tire quickly of the monotony: it demands to be played with a view to improving your skills, or the bulk of what the game has to offer is unavailable. But still, while *Genji*'s stages are environments that have been played through many a time before, they glisten with the kind of crisp colour that's rarely seen; ethereal temples in the sky, haunted caves and glimmering autumnal glades swallowed by storms of rusty leaves may not feel truly fresh, but they still dazzle. Its thematic looks are simply infused with starry, twinkling hues, and its aural ambience is stark and atmospheric. In fact, cleanliness and minimalism are the game's motifs, an equally accurate description of the game's combat, although the fixed camera angles sometimes irritate. They can obscure the fight, leaving enemies offscreen or the player perilously distant, clouding the use of your character's skills somewhat.

Of the two playable warriors – ponderous human hammerhead Benkei and slight athlete Yoshitsune – the latter feels to be the most enjoyable, his crisp, creamy strikes and dodge jumps offering much more flexible and athletic play. Benkei's walloping, gratifying attacks aren't to be dismissed, however, and there are few enough sections that force the player to use a certain character that they can simply stick with their favourite without feeling harassed.

But feeling the buzz of *Genji*'s countering system is key to enjoying it, making the eastern promise of demanding play feel attainable, if less exotic for those already well-versed in mastering such endeavours. Indeed, anyone adept at taking advantage of the subtleties of *Onimusha*'s combat may feel *Genji* to be somewhat limited. It's a brief experience too, taking less than ten hours to complete, but given texture by the time spent getting to grips with the nuances of its battle system.

Nonetheless, this is a confident and worthwhile debut for Game Republic: a game that's as good as you're willing to get at it. But where for many games that process is an obstacle, for *Genji* it's a seductive and dazzling invitation. **[8]**

> While Genji's stages are environments that have been played through many a time before, they glisten with crisp colour that's rarely seen

Genji is a relatively short, brief experience, but that's no drawback. If anything, it fits the game's attitude perfectly, allowing players to refine and perfect their strikes without having to invest ludicrous overtime









Yoshitsune has exclusive, simple dodges that can render him invincible to attacks that would otherwise break his guard. Brutal Benkei, however, has no need for such deftness, instead charging his enemies with a dash attack

Travel agents



Players are rarely stranded in any single area of *Genji*'s land, and can roam relatively freely between environments that have been opened up on the world map. Cleared areas will reliably spawn groups of enemies, useful for reaping experience. Revisiting areas is far from necessary, and feels anything but a trudge – as well as finding items, there's plenty of pleasure to be had from honing and showboating your counter skills against a more relaxed set of enemies than those waiting around the corner of the next plot-pertinent location.







The drop system rewards the player with pick-ups at regular intervals during continuous attacks. Much like *Dynasty Warriors*, it makes a last-ditch bid to tackle a group of enemies seem as much like salvation as suicide

DRAG-ON DRAGOON 2

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,500 (£33)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (US/UK)
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX DEVELOPER: CAVIA



Lead character Nowe has two allies to call upon in battle, but can only switch to them by changing weapons to those that only they can use. Eris (spear) and Manah (staff) have their own strengths and weaknesses against certain opponents, as well as their own eye-catching dodge steps and attacks



As the player completes chapters of the story, side missions become available for free play, allowing the reaping of bonus experience and weapons. Thanks to the game's generous range of weaponry and the striking accompanying combos, it's hard to resist exploring

Weapon collection



As with the original, *Dragoon 2*'s weapon set is a magnet for completists, offering a wealth of swords, staffs, axes and spears for dedicated collectors to unearth and upgrade. The criteria for uncovering many of these are far less demanding than the exhausting stage-combing hunts of *Drag-on Dragoon*, with some being made available for purchase from shops and treasure chests potentially containing new weapons being helpfully marked on the in-game map. The compilation of a complete and fully powered-up arsenal is hardly obligatory, but is one of the more compulsive and colourful aspects of the game.

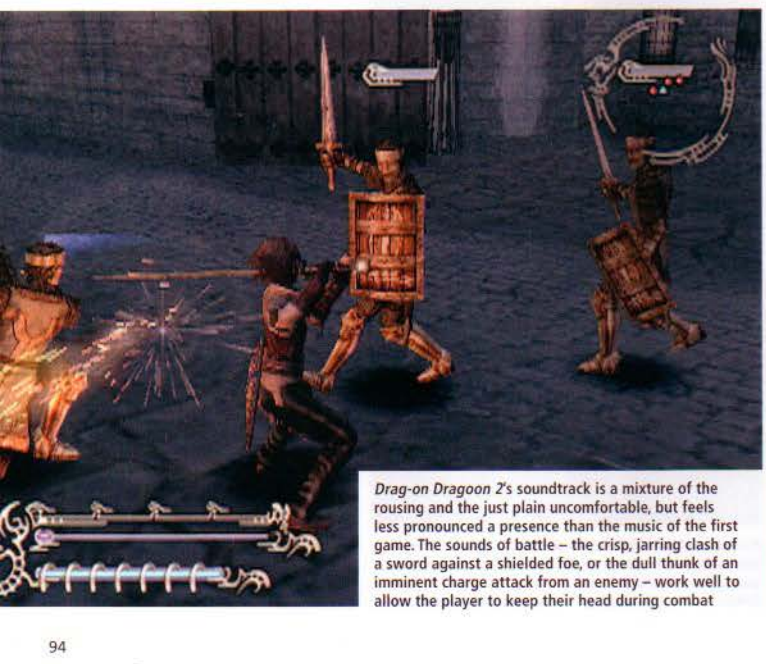
There's a lengthy subtitle to *Drag-on Dragoon 2 – Love Red, Ambivalence Black* – and it's the perfect summation of the original: seemingly awkward and overblown, but strangely beautiful to some. A mixture of gruelling, rhythmic swordplay on foot and grand air-to-ground/air combat on the back of a dragon, *Drag-on Dragoon* was host to some truly epic and strenuous battles whose ambition wasn't quite matched by its draw distance.

Nevertheless, as grinding a game as it could feel, few RPGs could match its brooding, pitch-black darkness, an unsettling downer of an experience fuelled as much by its bleakness as the pressure of suffering hour-long skirmishes with no mid-mission save function. For those who weathered it, *Drag-on Dragoon* became a true labour of love, and they are unlikely to forget the insanity that waited for them in the gloomiest reaches of the game.

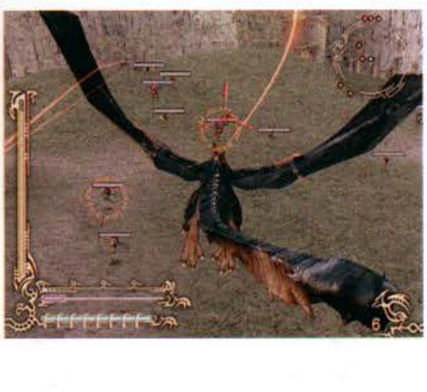
Drag-on Dragoon 2 appears far less unhinged than the original, and is a game that has patched some of its weaknesses, but not built on any strengths. On-foot controls have been expanded to include counters and dodge retreats, as well as including air-launcher attacks and some truly satisfying and explosive combo attacks. Mid-air dragon control is also slicker, mostly thanks to a hover button that allows the player to float and shoot instead of having to rely on multiple passes.

While the quality of character models has been upgraded significantly, things are distinctly less busy, and the thick of the game's combat can often feel thin. The enormous battlefields that rattled the player right from the off in *Drag-on Dragoon* have been reeled in, although later stages do still heap on the stress. It's then that the persistent lack of interim saves rears its head once again, even if such a demand can be countered somewhat with this sequel's inclusion of an inventory of healing items. Enemies no longer pile into the fray in repetitive clusters and seem to jog in from all directions, but there's far fewer this time around, and fights rarely feel home to the immense – if shallow – gratification that came from smashing through the crowded hordes present in the original. As such, the game feels somewhat compromised, but not significantly more accessible for it.

Ultimately, it just feels like less of an experience this time around. It's a gameworld that's still clotted with shadows – one that remains a refreshing blend next to the cardboard cut-out clichés of many a Japanese RPG – and there's still a sense of liberating power from being able to segue smoothly between dragon-back shooting and some intense melée hacking and swiping, but the end result feels not so much ambivalence black as just a little grey. **[6]**



Drag-on Dragoon 2's soundtrack is a mixture of the rousing and the just plain uncomfortable, but feels less pronounced a presence than the music of the first game. The sounds of battle – the crisp, jarring clash of a sword against a shielded foe, or the dull thunk of an imminent charge attack from an enemy – work well to allow the player to keep their head during combat





The bulk of the game's action takes place in the huge city. It streams beautifully, battles rampaging from one end to the other as you pursue your quarry. The price for its immense scale, sadly, is dullness – it's an uncharismatic place to be



THE INCREDIBLE HULK: ULTIMATE DESTRUCTION

FORMAT: GC, PS2, XBOX (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £40
RELEASE: SEPTEMBER PUBLISHER: VIVENDI
DEVELOPER: RADICAL PREVIOUSLY IN: E145, E149

At some point in *Ultimate Destruction's* development, the Radical team must surely have thought: 'We've created a monster'. And that's just what they've done. Hulk is monstrously, magnificently powerful, blasting through a vast city with all the grace and enthusiasm of a three-year-old and all the destructive power of half of NATO. He gives you what you thought you'd always wanted game developers to give you – unrationed, unrivalled power, and in giving it he serves as an object lesson in why developers usually don't.

An hour into *Ultimate Destruction*, it's hard to imagine how the rest of the game is going to avoid being a total pushover. With so much fun, freedom and power on offer from the outset, what hope is there for the game to have any sense of progression? Radical's answer is to lock away a vast repertoire of moves and to up the challenge far beyond what you might expect of a game targeting the casual end of the market.

But although your heart may sink at the idea of an unlockable moves list, in reality it's no hardship. Funds to access them come quick and easy, and can be continually harvested in the game's Challenge mode if you want to tool up before taking on the main story missions. Although the pat preview comment about the game was: 'It's *GTA: Hulk City*!' a much more useful reference point is something like *Mech Assault*. This is a complex, frenzied action game that requires sophisticated use of all three dimensions.

Once fluent in Hulk's explosive vocabulary of lamppost-javelins, boulder-bowling balls and tank football, it becomes apparent how much there is to praise in this game. It's hard to think of a superhero title that has come so close in delivering the spirit of the hero's super-ness. It's equally hard to think of a thirdperson action game which has had a camera which could cope so coolly under the extremes of the Hulk's destructive gymnastics. But, ultimately, in taming him Radical has shackled him. The violence of the battles is so pulverising that you rarely get a chance to use his most flamboyant moves, and fights gradually become tedious as the difficulty curve relies almost entirely on 'more and longer' for its gradient. Although facing off against the increasingly gigantic Hulkbuster mechs requires a change in tactics, a weirdly sporadic use of checkpoints can make longer fights exhausting rather than exhilarating. Although the Challenge missions (see 'Going for gold') provide excellent light relief from these bruising battles, the game – by sticking so close to old school gaming conventions – doesn't live up to the enormous amount of fun its first hour or two promises. **[6]**







Repeated and multiple rocket salvos often juggle Hulk into the air, rendering him an easy target for another batch of salvos. Although an air recovery move can be soon be bought, it remains an frustrating bit of design, hampering your fighting style



The promising Weaponisation system is sadly rarely useful in pitched battle, as enemies will often knock the new weapon out of your hands before you've had a chance to use it



When Hulk collects enough health, he enters Critical Mass, which gives him access to super-powered moves which are vital for taking down big enemies. Of course, big enemies are very unlikely to let him collect enough health in the first place, so you may have to rely on bombarding them with trucks instead

Going for gold



Dotted across the playing area are challenge mission markers, which give you access to tasks from the predictable (join-the-dots, time trial obstacle courses), to the cathartic (take out as many aircraft as possible by batting their own missiles back at them), to the pleasingly batty (playing car-football against a mech goalie). Once played, these are all accessible from the main menu, adding some easily accessible R'n'R from the main game's clanking clashes. Medals and new high scores grant you smash points – the game's unified currency, used for unlocking moves. These can be found dotted around the city, are awarded for all damage done and given as bonuses for mission completion. The variety on offer in the challenge missions means amassing them is never a chore.



OZ

FORMAT: PS2 PRICE: ¥6,800 (£35)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), TBA (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE (KCET)



The level of a super attack matches the number of participants: first a personal aura strike, then a tagteam assault and finally an all-party apocalypse

Return to Oz



Completing the game puts a set of costumes and accessories on sale at the shop, including Robbie the Rabbit suits (complete with an iron pipe). Beyond aesthetic changes, it's also possible to unlock entirely new sidestory levels and, ultimately, another team's worth of characters. An extra mode, the 35th Platoon, even allows you to experience juggling first-hand, playing a trio of bog-standard Volo enemies against a superpowered team.

Having been spared an abortive steampunk and black eyeliner American McGee treatment, L Frank Baum's Oz story has provided equally unlikely inspiration for the *Suikoden III* team's latest work. Toto's early appearance as a red, shark-grinned winged cat indicates that it's a case of 'loosely based on', though, with *OZ* owing more to the party combat focus of the developer's previous title.

Now transposed to a familiar thirdperson action environment, the mechanics are surprisingly tightly wound, supported by meaty physics and some inventive and aggressive enemies. Much of the game is spent as a trio, with two AI partners in tow that can be left to their own devices or directed to blindside a targeted opponent, but their true worth is in the game's combo system, only possible as a team effort.

After wearing down an enemy's defences it can be launched into the air and served to a partner, who will juggle it in turn, then pass it to the next available character – the litany of shouted names recalling *DOAX* matches, an action game coopting a sports game's rhythm – until the unfortunate dies or is dropped. Long volleys charge a super-attack gauge through three levels of power,





Falling in combat prompts a button-mashing recovery sequence, allowing resurrection at the cost of those elusive S-ranks. Items purchased between levels can allow faster recovery, or for your AI partners to step in and rescue you

and a well-placed super attack can knock further enemies off their feet, continuing the chain and immediately recharging the gauge – allowing you to sear through an entire level in a haze of screen-clearing effects.

That much is the idea, but early efforts may make your hero appear like those cursed to be eternally picked last for the team in PE, fumbling return after return. The period when a combo is literally out of your hands feels painfully long when other enemies are closing in, then too short when, preoccupied, a cue is missed and your target arcs in from offscreen. Thankfully, your comrades are silently forgiving of failures, one of *OZ*'s only concessions to breaking a player in.

Despite a tutorial section, gameplay itself isn't so much balanced to encourage successful chaining as oppressively unfair without it – perhaps a result of the team's genre inexperience, or simply of Japanese skill-based gaming mentality. But when the learning curve is finally crested, the view is spectacular: any of the game's levels are tangibly enriched the better you become at its novel multitasking. Where other action games leave you open to attack mid-combo, here you're open to attack, defend, dodge and dash, snatch a new strategy in a moment between button presses.

Hugely replayable even without its generosity of extra features (see 'Return to Oz'), *OZ*'s source material is evident where it needs to be: there's no shortage of brains, courage or heart. **[8]**



While you must play as the story's hero, Feel, in the main game, EX Mode allows replay with a protagonist and party chosen from any unlocked characters





OZ's artwork is stark and striking when used for chapter introductions and dialogue, and the in-game character models carry its *Zone Of The Enders* vs *Suikoden* aesthetic ably in what may be RenderWare's weirdest gi
Fans are already translating the reams of talking heads i
response to rumours the game may not see a US release



ADVANCE WARS: DUAL STRIKE

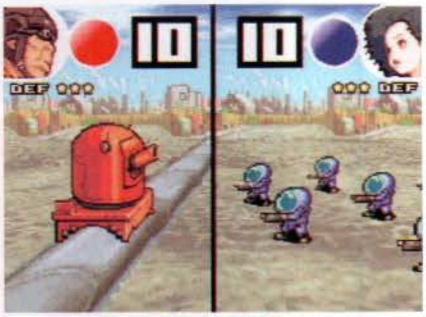
FORMAT: DS PRICE: £40 RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), AUG 22 (US), SEP 30 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO DEVELOPER: INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS



Commanding your units via a stylus is as pleasantly instinctive and swift as you'd expect – and probably essential for Survival mode's against-the-clock rounds – but a slip of the pen can all too easily spoil your turn

Advance Wars is a problem, but it's the kind of problem you'd be glad to have. The simple strategy classic was the function for the GBA's form, arriving where it had always belonged after more than a decade's reclusive refinement in Japan. It had a design and interface so impeccable, and an art style so toothsome, that it tore the scales from the eyes of strategy-phobes everywhere. It seemed perfect, but its perfection landed its creators with a successful new franchise and nowhere to take it. Consequently, in the sequel, they took it hardly anywhere at all.

In bringing the latest version to DS, Intelligent Systems has been substantially more generous and courageous, though still careful to leave that precious core untouched. Alongside format-specific features – download multiplayer, touchscreen control and some twin-screen battles – it has added seven new units, nine new COs, a substantial overhaul of the CO system and two new modes (Combat and Survival). Many feel like mere novelties, but not all.



The new units vary from arms race escalation (the hulking Magatank) to bizarre curio (the Black Boat, a floating repair shop). The Stealth Bomber is a major addition, but the Piperunner, a long-range cannon, is the most entertaining



There are so many intricacies now that Campaign mode (against the Black Hole armies once more) feels like a tutorial for itself, although it's far from short, and hardly a pushover for any but the most expert warmongers. These players' brains will instead be exercised by the head-spinning permutations of the new CO system, wherein you can combine two COs' abilities in one battle as a tag-team, and also level them up, gaining attribute modifiers called Forces which can be allocated to four slots. There's a bewildering depth of customisation here which will only be fully explored over time in War Room score attacks and multiplayer grudge matches, but if you don't want to care, you won't have to.

Twin-screen play is a more slender addition. Its use to depict the land and air fronts of one battle is relegated to a set-piece tool in Campaign mode, in which (admittedly stunning) instance control of units in the air is handed to a CPU CO. Elsewhere – in the War Room challenges, for example – it simply presents a simultaneous battle on two maps. It's easy to imagine a more sustained attempt to bifurcate the gameplay ending up halving it, so the restraint was probably wise.



The War Room has a range of new maps, including some in the DS twin-screen style. A handicap system offers points mulitpliers for players who are willing to do without the benefit of dual COs and/or Force abilities

As if in frustration at the inflexible brilliance of its creation, Intelligent Systems has used it as the basis for a completely different game: Combat mode, a basic realtime shooter living on borrowed strategy. It actually makes some sense as a frantic multiplayer diversion, but it's never more than a crudely animated sketch of a still-life masterpiece. Thank heavens, then, for the brilliant Survival mode (see 'The art of Survival'). Of all *Dual Strike*'s little reinventions it's the only one to twist the template into a persuasive new shape. But in truth, that's one more than it needed, because it's a new *Advance Wars*, and as such it was doomed to that old perfection from the start. **[8]**



The game's aggressively chunky cartoon militarism gives it real all-ages appeal, and the bold and funtional front end should be the envy of this and other industries

The art of Survival



Survival mode challenges you to get through a sequence of maps within a limit, either of funds, moves, or active playtime. In a way, it limits tactical freedom, but the fierce focus on objectives it requires is a compelling lesson in strategic forethought. As a bonus, you get to exercise it in a series of gorgeously crafted, humorous and cunning micro-scenarios that act more like puzzles than the general run of *Advance Wars* gameplay. There are flaws, though: you'll end up repeating perfected maps a lot on the way to later stages, and a chance to retry lost battles rather than start again would have been appreciated. Here's hoping they'll be ironed out in future versions of this elegant and demanding subgame.



CODED ARMS

FORMAT: PSP PRICE: $40 (£23)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN, US), SEPTEMBER 1 (UK)
PUBLISHER: KONAMI DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE

The best that can be said about *Coded Arms* is that it knows its own mind – something that, initially, seems to be anything but the case. Levels are limited and repetitive with all the diversity of a storage depot crammed with container lorries, and its rooms are more cabinets than caverns, resplendent with right angles and long straights plugged together like Duplo bricks. But the underlying method is more purposeful than it seems, the game's infinitely extensible nature demanding that its maps are comprised of these blocks.

An opening campaign plays across three environmentally distinct sectors – City, Base and Ruins – that blossom into a tree of levels that then branches towards separate boss encounters. *Coded Arms*' true goal, however, is to create an experience that belies this base – one that can shun traditional FPS structure and perpetuate itself by randomly generating levels. So singular is the game's pursuit of this notion that genre assumptions can all but destroy its appeal. The game has no story; the only character it possesses is in the competent repertoire of visual and aural effects that flesh out its hackneyed world – a virtual reality jumble of Matrix and *Metal Gear*.

What *Arms*' future fans will savour, however, is the cycle by which player and enemy climb the ladder of statistics-based ability. The game's currency is code – scattered throughout each level and dropped by fallen foes. As well as providing you with new weapons, armour, and occasional time-limited abilities, code more commonly augments existing items, doing so time and again to provide you with the required tools for surviving waves of opponents. The combat this entails is retrograde – downscaled on all levels to ensure that neither the screen nor archaic single-stick control system confound the player. A moderately decent lock-on, however, ensures things never regress too far, and that a degree of flair can still be enacted by nimble hands.



***Coded Arms*' inclusive arsenal is divided into classes, each of which differently impacts its cast of bots, bugs and soldiers. Adaptive selection is vital if the game's final stages are to be survived**

Competent and novel as it is, *Arms* ultimately loses more than it gains. It's difficult to adapt fully to its inexorable dynamic without at times lamenting the thrills and spills that have been discarded in order to achieve it. With the exception of the three bosses, there are no escalations or climaxes, no set-pieces, ambushes, chokepoints or challenges that involve anything more than the eradication of a roomful of enemies by way of laboured strafes and hops. The game casts a hook so slender, in fact, that only a modest audience is likely to bite – one driven more by a fetish for number-powered guns than by any unmistakable act of brilliance that shines beyond. **[5]**



There are two reasons to destroy each room's various furnishings – the first is to salvage whatever power-up lies within, the second being to admire the accompanying lightshow



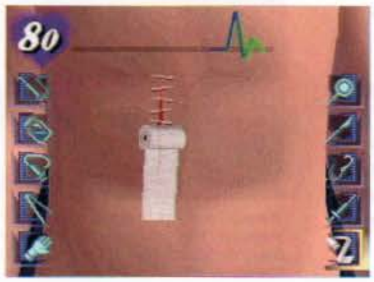
CHOU SHITTOU CADUCEUS

FORMAT: DS PRICE: ¥4,800 (£25)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (JAPAN), Q4 2005 (UK)
PUBLISHER: ATLUS DEVELOPER: IN-HOUSE









The rhythm of the game – inject, syphon, slice, tweeze, swab, stitch and stick – can become hypnotic. Later levels require you to heal multiple wounds at once, which can only be managed using the magical pentagram (top right) which, when drawn, dramatically slows down time

Caduceus is a game which will disgust you. To be known as *Trauma Centre: Under The Knife* in the west, its surgical theme calls on you to gouge, stab, burn and slurp at bloodied, festering flesh. It may all be to save lives, but there's a strong element of delicious sadism in delving your stylus into the guts of your unconscious patient.

And that, for the most part, is all you'll be doing. As a young doctor looking to make your name, each of your operations has a time limit, a ceiling on the number of mistakes you can make and a patient whose heart rate is dropping toward a flatline. Each case is different, and will require judicious use of scalpels, syringes and sutures as well as pitting you against an increasingly preposterous roster of colour-coded parasites. Working with the stylus is deft and satisfying, and the nature of the game means that tension and absorption are almost guaranteed. It's an experience that's inventively and intelligently tailored to the hardware in a way that is rapidly becoming something you can take for granted on the DS's stronger titles. While the idea of a surgery game isn't new, the implementation has never been this perfectly delivered.

There are annoyances, however. Each operation, once completed in story mode, becomes available as a score attack level, where you can hone your scalpel skills in pursuit of an S rank, but even for these levels you've proven you can successfully complete, you'll still have to tap through the advice that persistently pops up from your mouthy assistants, interrupting the game's sense of skill and flow. Rankings, too, feel unpredictable – with botch jobs scoring highly and fast, clean masterclasses seeming inexplicably penalised. Another frustration is the inability to quit out of an operation, meaning that your only way back to the level-select screen is a reset or a campaign of deliberate medical negligence. Nonetheless, this is unquestionably one of the DS's best titles: it may put a squirm in your stomach, but you're assured a smile on your face. **[7]**



As the game – and the parasite infection – progresses, the surgical tasks get increasingly bizarre, and become a real test of stylus skills



BIG MUTHA TRUCKERS 2: TRUCK ME HARDER

FORMAT: PS2, XBOX PRICE: £20 RELEASE: OUT NOW PUBLISHER: EMPIRE DEVELOPER: EUTECHNYX





Gambling tables are available at most trading posts, coming together to provide a casino of distractions that, ironically, perform better as a highlight of the otherwise-desolate playground

The sequel to 2002's *Big Mutha Truckers* isn't quite as crude as either its predecessor or its title, but neither is it as surprising or developed as that comment might suggest. This is a series still gridlocked between the redblooded ruckus of Every Which Way But Loose and some of the most unintentionally lethargic mechanics yet seen in a driving game. For all its wit and swagger, *Truckers* is inescapably safety-conscious, rewarding the maintenance of a planned route and steady trajectory while more arresting notions – spontaneous risk, for example – fall from the back like poorly fastened cases of moonshine.

A grotesque bazaar of American caricatures continues to represent the game's saving grace, shaking up a flavoursome enough cocktail to ensure that its limited mileage never leaves you short of scenery. Accordingly, a few hours of enjoyment can be had as the simple trading system grabs a firm hold of your hand and takes you on a tour of what is, at a fundamental level, a competently assembled game. Visually, it sits somewhere in the transition stage between Dreamcast and PS2, poorly textured but artistically adequate. Similarly, the game's voiceover work is unapologetic trash (meant in the nicest possible way), and as such fulfils its obligation here.



Truckers often gives and takes away in equal measure, its humour often witty but obvious, its locations distinctive but limited in number

But *Truckers*' many attempts at sending its grinding pattern of play into fashionably reckless spins serve only to reinforce its overall rigidity. Cop car chases, UFO attacks, crash bonuses and other assorted gimmicks involve working your rig into little more than a variation of the same laboured, rhythmic sway. Push the envelope towards too vulgar a display of hard driving and the result will just as likely be a bonus-destroying hiccup of physics as the intended 30-ton vehicular assassination. Amusing and colourful as it is, you have to question the worth of a game that does so little to extend its genre beyond a novelty cabinet and a £1 coin. **[4]**



GAMETRAK: REAL WORLD GOLF

FORMAT: PC, PS2 (VERSION TESTED) PRICE: £30 (SOLUS), £50 (WITH GAMETRAK) RELEASE: AUGUST 26 PUBLISHER: IN2GAMES DEVELOPER: AQUA PACIFIC PREVIOUSLY IN: E146

Golf is a game that already has its bases well-covered among consumers, with Tiger Woods games for console gamers, coin-based *Golden Tee* for pub-dwelling casual fans, electric putting machines for armchair enthusiasts and, well, the real thing's mini/adventure/crazy guises for everyone else. In relying on In2Games' Gametrak (the string-and-glove-based 'direct motion capture system'), *Real World Golf* is trying to bundle all the above incarnations into software that's sophisticated, feels realistic but remains accessible and easy for everyone. The result unfortunately lands a little too far from the green.

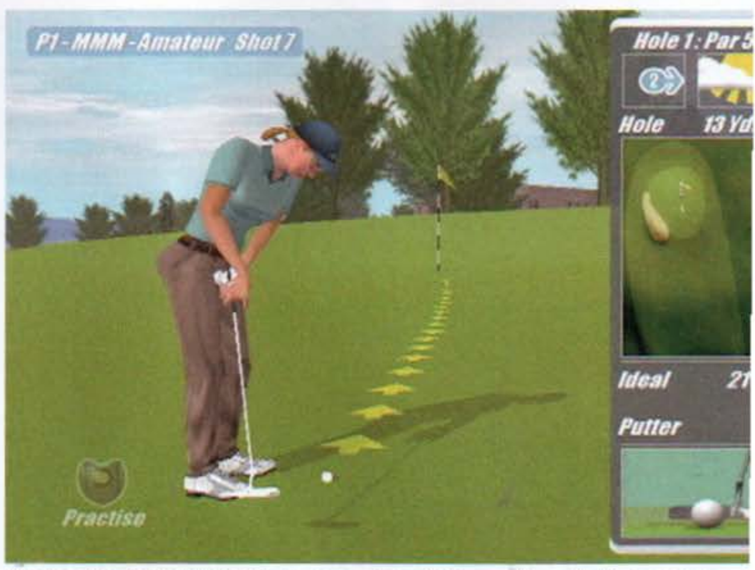
The game comes with its own toy club in order to help players get a handle on the game and, despite feeling a little basic, it allows players to take the right stance and the peripheral to track movement correctly, with just the slightest wrist twist altering the angle of the club head. However it's soon clear that the device lacks tactile feedback and serious precision. It takes a while to get used to the control system's idiosyncrasies, and although swinging is gratifyingly effective, putting feels a touch random and dulled. The software over-compensates to cover player inaccuracies or the device's



As well as standard 18-hole courses to play, there are varied challenge and multiplayer options. These more relaxed, exaggerated efforts are probably best suited for initiating golf novices

shortcomings, but this only means your successes can feel hollow and unsatisfying.

It's not totally soulless, though. The commentary from Peter Alliss is lively (and entertainingly sarcastic when a stroke or putt goes sensationally wrong), and presentation is snappy despite the simplistic design. Unfortunately, the impression you're left with is that, while this is leagues better than last year's fighting effort *Dark Wind* – and might be worthy of being dragged out for social fun the way the EyeToy or *SingStar* is – it's still just a novelty and won't replace the tried-and-tested alternatives. The Gametrak device still needs a sweet-spot killer app: maybe In2Games' next effort will be the hole-in-one its inventiveness deserves. **[5]**



It's in the putting that *Real World Golf* really comes undone, with the sense of a peculiar dead zone at the lowest point of the Gametrak's swing – it's a real blow since precision is obviously crucial at this stage


MIDWINTER

TIME EXTEND

MIDWINTER

FORMAT: **AMIGA, PC, ST**
PUBLISHER: **RAINBIRD SOFTWARE**
DEVELOPER: **MICROPLAY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE DATE: **1989**



As any bunker-building, can-hoarding survivalist will tell you, it's the little things that matter most

Everyone who knows *Midwinter* knows it's about scale. 160,000 square miles of explorable terrain. Thirty-two playable characters who, in their fight for survival against a would-be dictator, can work solo or in coordination to create billions of possible strategic combinations. Snowmobiles, skis, hang-gliders and more at your disposal. A fleet of enemy craft that can be destroyed with missiles, grenades and well-placed sniper bullets. Or, equally devastatingly, can be picked at with cruel precision, gunning down generals and supply vehicles until the rest desert in desperation. Pilots, doctors and engineers serve vital roles, as do local civilians – frail old ladies and quick-thinking children able to use their innocent appearance to help the resistance. Even now, it would be a game whose scope would guarantee it attention. Sixteen years ago, what it promised was barely imaginable. Playing it felt like time travel – a sneak peak at the blueprint that showed how games were going to be. It was then, and is now, an enormous accomplishment.

But everyone who plays *Midwinter* knows it's about another kind of scale.





Midwinter is one of the smallest games ever made. It's intimate, overwhelming and above all human. It's not that the number-crunching brandished on the back of the box isn't important, it's just that its function is the opposite of what you might expect. *Midwinter* isn't designed to make the world feel big; it's designed to make you feel small.

This human scale is apparent from the very first seconds. As John Stark, leader of the Free Villages Peace Force, you begin the game isolated, vulnerable, guilty and frightened. Midwinter Isle is the only world you've known. A bleak, ice-locked island, it's home to a small community of survivors who, over decades of desperate and incremental struggle have built what may be the last human settlement after a meteor triggered a climatic cataclysm and froze much of the world. A second-generation islander, this is all you've known of humanity – hardy settlers who are just beginning to reap the rewards of taming the island's volcanic heat source. As the world's habitable regions were eroded by the ice and rumours of Midwinter's success spread, successive groups of refugees have found their way here by boat, and the steadily expanding population has brought discord and rivalry in the place of the old-time frontier spirit. As the island's chief of police, your job was to maintain order. Instead, wanting to avoid conflict, you turned a blind eye. Now, word has reached you that one of the newcomers has amassed an army on the island's southern peninsula. His goal domination, his method force. War has come to the island, and you have the responsibility of stopping it.

But while the game's set-up puts you in the position of a hero, it doesn't give you tools to match the job. Stark is desperately, despicably human. In most games, your responsibility to save the day is born from the fact that you're the person who has the power to – whether it's due to how fast you can run or how high you can jump, your Mjolnir armour or your Master Sword. In *Midwinter*, great power doesn't create great responsibility, nor does great responsibility create great power. Stopping this invasion is simply Stark's job, and he's given no extra tools to do it. He has his skis, his rifle, his fitness and his friends. Standing in the open, trying to absorb that the attack has begun and all lines of communication are broken, the throb of the approaching enemy vehicles gives him one choice: run.

From then on, your role is to sustain a guerrilla war against General Masters' thousands of troops. In the course of the struggle, you'll spend more time battling the environment than you do enemy soldiers. Stark will ski to the point of exhaustion, blacking out before tumbling with sickening realism into a heap of limbs and sticks. A head wound could leave him trapped in a mountain hut, forced to wait his injury out while Masters' troops swarm across the island. Take an ill advised shortcut across a rocky outcrop and you're likely to crash your snow-buggy, leaving you to limp onwards on foot at a tenth of the speed. Stark, ultimately, could be irrelevant, serving out the game as a prisoner, while people he barely knows win the war for him. The scale of the conflict is punishingly small, relying on sheer determination to slog across tens of miles of snow and then turn on your heel yards from your destination and slog back because someone else has been injured or captured. In the end, what defeats the player in *Midwinter* is what would defeat its characters: impatience, carelessness, panic and trying to play the hero.

This humanity extends to the interplay of the personalities involved. To recruit each of the 32 characters, each must be visited and asked for their help. Skeleton biographies of each person reveal who they're most likely to listen to. It's

In the end, what defeats the player in Midwinter is what would defeat its characters: impatience, carelessness, panic and trying to play the hero







Hours could be sent staring at the beautiful map screen, running through sets of possibilities: aim for all the radio masts or go for a direct assault?



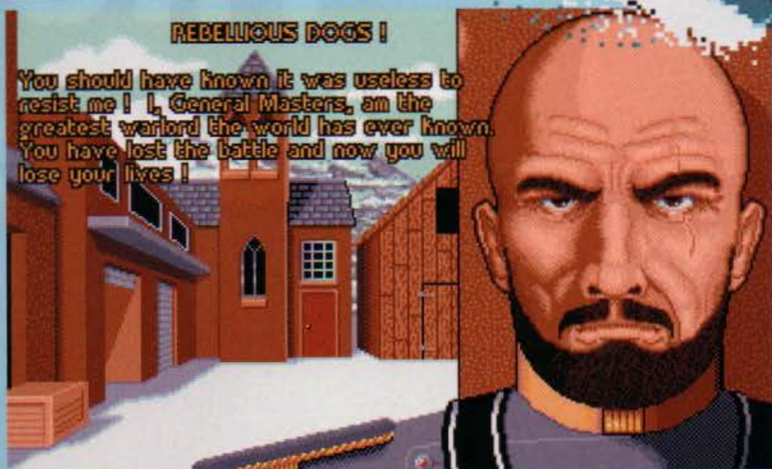
The game's visual design still stands up as a paragon of clarity and style, adding a sense of atmosphere as well as the detailed abstract information on times, speeds, and angles which gave the gameplay much of its depth. Its successes are partly why players have such a vibrant memory of a game which was fundamentally monochrome











Even in Training mode, this was a screen many players saw often. Masters' progress across the wastes of Midwinter Isle seemed impossibly rapid, and advance troops had to be targeted early in order to hold him back

necessary to absorb a soap-opera's worth of information to successfully plan a strategy: who broke whose nose in a fist fight? Who suspects his wife of an affair? Who has never forgiven the doctor for the death of his son? It's a rigid, simple system: if A hates B, and B has been wronged by C, A won't know he ought to warm to C. Nevertheless, these thumbnail sketches add a sense of warmth to a game lacking in many nobler heroes. It's fundamentally disappointing that at a time when 'realism' in gaming has become such a watchword, a game where the heroes have jobs, girlfriends, children and histories still feels exceptional.

While the game's core mechanic illustrates human traits rarely exploited by games, the overall setting reflects that most defining human characteristic: intelligence. *Midwinter* is an unashamedly smart game. Its prologue isn't a novella of dumb fantasy, but of dry science that walks you through eco-terrorist attacks, climate theory and the cost of political inaction. It's a bleak vision of the future, a century of failures and miscalculations. By the time the game opens, in 2099, the stage is set for a battle of gargantuan significance – there's every reason to believe that these are the last free humans anywhere in the world. But by putting the battle in the hands of Stark, who has no experience of the world as it was, the game downplays the situation, swapping hollow grandeur for the intimate, believable desperation of a man fighting to protect his home and his loved ones.

And all this before you get to the game. Relentlessly difficult, dauntingly freeform, *Midwinter*'s blend of skilled action and meticulous strategy had an almost Darwinian approach to its players: victory had to be earned, not inherited. The fractally generated landscapes weren't just technically impressive, but powerfully atmospheric: contemplating the cold indigo of an accurately shadowed peak was enough to make you think twice and take the long route round. Despite the distances involved, skiing and hang-gliding were satisfying and varied. Combat was clumsy, but authentically so, and in a way that made victories events to be celebrated.

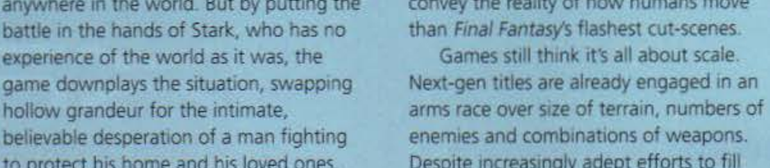
Aesthetically the game still stands – its presentation clear and vibrant, its few frames of animation doing more to convey the reality of how humans move than *Final Fantasy*'s flashest cut-scenes.

Games still think it's all about scale. Next-gen titles are already engaged in an arms race over size of terrain, numbers of enemies and combinations of weapons. Despite increasingly adept efforts to fill the spaces that can now be created, most still end up feeling empty. *Midwinter* was 400 square miles of almost total white emptiness – no narrative beyond the manual, no missions, no NPCs to talk to, no hidden packages to collect. And yet it's an experience in which the tension never drops, where character is conveyed with subtlety and charm, where the sense of freedom never falters, where skill and strategy go hand in hand. In 1989 it felt like a blueprint for the future. In 2005, it still is.

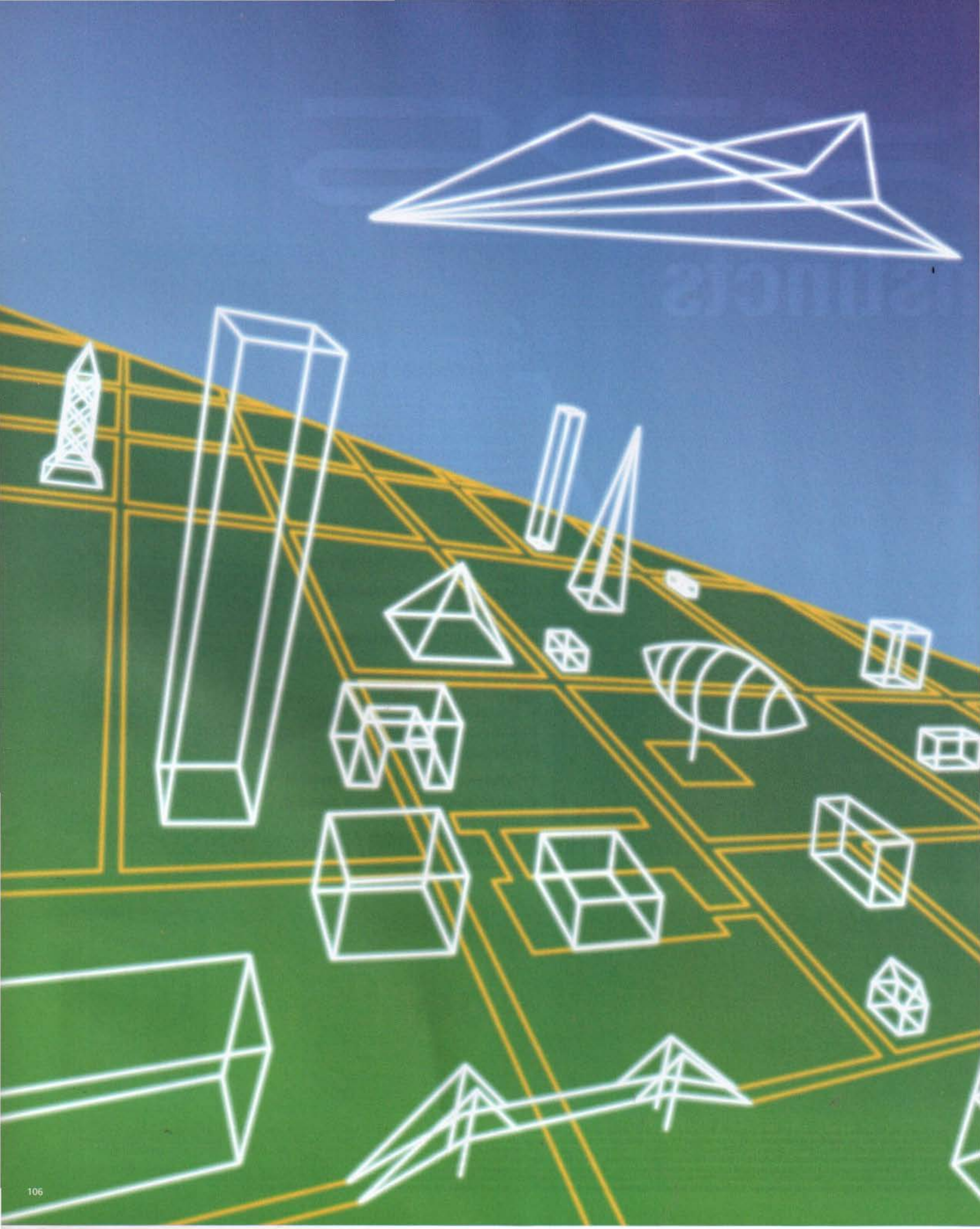


PRESS START TO LOSE

For all of *Midwinter*'s substantial ambitions, its gruelling difficulty could be offset by a number of sneaky tricks. Stark's position at the start of the game was apparently random (within certain parameters), but sharp-eyed players soon noticed that in fact it was governed by exactly where you positioned the cursor over the 'Play' icon on the start screen. Certain areas were sure to land you in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by people who loathed Stark for their own often unfounded reasons, and could make for a uniquely demoralising play experience. For those who did persevere, another trick could come to the rescue: zooming in all the way in sniper mode made you miraculously immune to enemy attacks – although perhaps a little seasick. For anyone who thinks that the difficulty is exaggerated, it's worth noting that the game's beginner mode prevented enemy units from causing any damage whatsoever, and yet still proved tough enough to defeat many seasoned campaigners.







THE MAKING OF… MERCENARY

Explore a city, steal vehicles and make money from rival factions, all with a dose of humour and plenty of secrets. Sound familiar?

ORIGINAL FORMAT: **C64** PUBLISHER: **NOVAGEN** DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **UK** RELEASE DATE: **1985**

It was not immediately obvious what auteur programmer Paul Woakes had in mind when he first showed his game *Mercenary* to business manager **Bruce Jordan** in Novagen's small offices above a row of shops in Birmingham.

"I think it was in the second half of '84 that I first saw *Mercenary* as an exercise in free flight, viewing a green horizon against a blue sky with an economically representative vector road network and a rotating vector graphics cube," says Jordan. "The on-board flight simulation element of the demo was fully functional, but that, as I remember it, was it. So, yes, nice, but where was the game?"

For Woakes, however, this was the first step towards a simple, although startlingly ambitious, result. "He did say that he planned to generate a 'cityscape' as a backdrop to the flying experience and that he was taken with the idea of simulating a 'real environment' in which the player could go anywhere and choose to do anything. And to that end, he was going to develop a routine where the player could land and get out and walk. I believe that Paul already had quite advanced ideas of what should be going on here, but it certainly wasn't in his nature to rattle off a presentation of his thoughts."

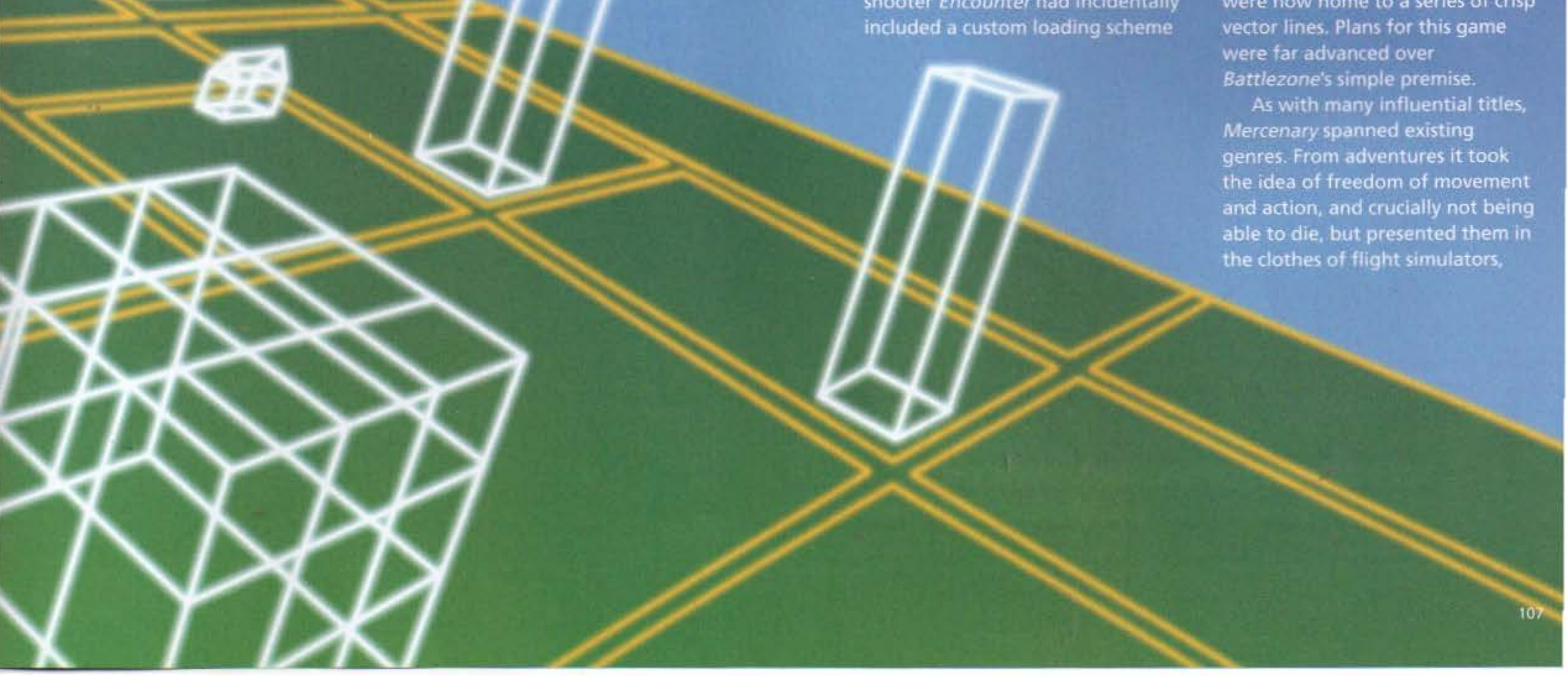
The highly introverted Woakes had formed Novagen with Jordan as a way of releasing whichever of his programming projects could be turned into something marketable. Like many a highly accomplished programmer, Woakes was, and still is, an extremely shy and private person. With Jordan to take care of the business and with PR Tim Bosher to talk to the media, he could concentrate on producing software without too many unpleasant distractions. It was an arrangement that worked well, and continues to this day.

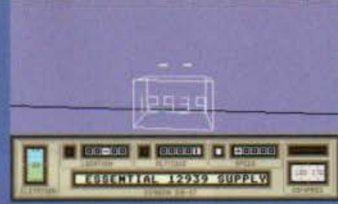
It was not unusual for Woakes to suddenly turn up with complete or near-complete programs. He worked from his home, playing around with ideas, and when he felt something was ready to show he'd bring it in. Sometimes he'd completely forget to mention valuable innovations entirely. The Commodore 64 version of his 1984 shooter *Encounter* had incidentally included a custom loading scheme that worked ten times faster than Commodore's own. The first Jordan had known about that was when a magazine phoned up asking: "How does it do that?" "Do what?" he'd replied, and when he found out quickly realised the potential in what became Novaload, a turbo loader routine that brought much relief to players and programmers, and was so successful even Commodore licensed it to use for its own software.

The heavily *Battlezone*-inspired 3D shooter *Encounter*, Woakes' previous game, had been a great success, but had used solid graphics rather than the Atari arcade machine's trademark vectors. With *Mercenary*, the clear blue sky and lush green ground were now home to a series of crisp vector lines. Plans for this game were far advanced over *Battlezone*'s simple premise.

"He was taken with the idea of simulating a 'real environment' in which the player could go anywhere and choose to do anything"

As with many influential titles, *Mercenary* spanned existing genres. From adventures it took the idea of freedom of movement and action, and crucially not being able to die, but presented them in the clothes of flight simulators,

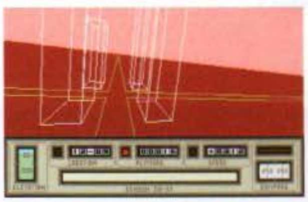






Unlike contemporaries such as *Elite*, there was no attempt to remove 'hidden' lines behind the front surface. Being able to see completely through objects not only made the game significantly faster, but was exploited in in-game jokes such as the 'Essential 12939 supply'





FOR THOSE IN NEED OF INSTRUCTION

At Woakes' suggestion, the original *Mercenary* shipped with minimal instructions, which explained the controls and little more. Public and retail demand, however, forced the inclusion of a detailed type-written 'hint sheet' to get people started.

With the release of *The Second City* expansion pack Novagen went further still, producing a high quality Targ Survival Kit. This featured a tourist guide to Central City, including a street map, which required road names to be invented as they weren't present in the actual game. As with the locations, things were oddly familiar to Birmingham residents. Reading carefully through the accompanying notes revealed clues, such as a rental craft called the 'Casper Hanley Eagle 8 Special Edition'. This was a sly post-rationalisation to explain why a high-performance aircraft was called a 'Cheese'. A bundled novella Interlude On Targ was written by Jordan. The help provided was limited however, as the kit did not give anything away about the far harder *Second City*.

driving games and shooters. There were multiple solutions, and several routes to get there, but you could completely ignore them if you wished and just look at the scenery. There was no judgement of right or wrong, just consequences for actions.

On several levels, *Mercenary* was as much about what wasn't there as what was. From the brief game aim – escape from Targ – to the sparse, vector graphics that formed your view of Central City, the abstraction allowed the user to fill in much of what was missing. Targ was enormous, but largely empty. Keeping the game running at a high framerate was vital, and it was a straightforward optimisation to spread the buildings far enough apart so that only one set of structures would be in view.

The *Mercenary* program itself was what we'd now call a game engine. Save files contained almost all the data needed to recreate Central City. This ironically gave the insubstantial Targ a sense of solidity for the player; it never 'forgot' where you'd left a ship or object. It also allowed development of the game data using a slightly modified version of the game itself. "Paul produced a sort of utility where you'd in effect float something in the air, and you'd ride a ship around to view it, whatever you'd keyed in as data," explains Jordan. Objects within the game, such as the cobweb skeleton key, were useful debugging tools left in for the final release.

Flying through the city reveals a patchwork of friends, Novagen colleagues, personal references such as a local pub and obscure Brummie in-jokes

The city architect was Woakes' friend Gary Walton. A not-so-modest monument in the shape of a giant W stands in stead of a written credit. Design was minimal, a structure or object could be suggested using just a few lines, and once completed Woakes and Jordan would have a look and come up with a suitable description – the system was not sophisticated, but was revealing. "These were names plucked out of the air," recalls Jordan.

Flying through the city reveals an interesting patchwork of friends, Novagen colleagues, personal references such as a local pub and incredibly obscure Brummie in-jokes. This arbitrary and unplanned system meant that they were writing the game essentially to amuse themselves. This sense of genuine fun was obvious to players, and contributed substantially to its appeal. So who was responsible for that? "The mischief is Paul's, the cynicism is mine," says Jordan, before reconsidering: "Actually, the cynicism is Paul's, too."

Woakes' mischief meant the game was packed with little secrets, many of which wouldn't be uncovered until months after the release. "Paul had great faith in the players," recalls Jordan, believing that "they would find even the remotest things. People would come back in a year's time, or write to a magazine: 'Did you know this happened?'"

One example of 'pure Paul' was the offer to buy a ship at the start of the game. You could choose to pay, of course, but for the more adventurous (or amoral) you could just walk up and steal it. This *Grand Theft Aircraft* would even attract the attention of local law enforcement.

"The idea was that there was a response for anything that anybody could do. He'd run that to ridiculous levels," says Jordan. "If somebody did something stupid they'd suddenly find that he'd recognised they could do it."

Rather than coming up with a plot in advance, it was written around features in the world, and evolved as development progressed. The conflict between the Palyars and Mechanoids, which gave the player a Yojimbo-esque freedom to play both sides off



In another innovation, your arrival on Targ used an in-engine cut-scene. The 3D system allowed the dramatic switching of scale required to go from seeing the whole planet from space, to the detail of this rather less than dignified 'landing'



against each other, was initially included to explain the lack of inhabitants on the planet, and why there was a floating colony craft.

Another cinematic touch was the characterisation. The Palyar commander's brother-in-law, who was included by Woakes as a dig at someone he didn't get on with at the time, was never seen, but his presence was felt throughout the game. As events unfolded it became clear that you were slowly making his life a misery. You could steal his old ship, destroy his new one, remove all his furniture and blow up his house. In later *Mercenary* games he would be your nemesis, but here you gradually became his. Rather than being told you had an arch-enemy and why, you essentially created him through your own actions. The character's absence strangely echoed Woakes himself, rarely seen, and yet with oddly personal parts of himself scattered throughout this virtual world.

Getting Woakes to stop adding more and more new features so that the game could actually be released was extremely difficult. "There's always the phrase: 'Oh it would be nice to do this'," Jordan recalls. Features mentioned in previews and adverts, such as more defined missions, ground-based fire and randomising the environment were unfortunately lost when Jordan finally persuaded Woakes that a line had to be drawn under development.

With success came a swift expansion pack. Completed in about a month and mostly handled by now-experienced designer Jordan, *The Second City* was a particularly evil remix of the original. The objects, their functions and the city map were all jumbled up. New Woakes mischief took the form of teleporter mazes, cloned colony craft and invisible rooms where the vector lines took on the same colour as the background. This radically different and far harder game was delivered as a single savegame file, the earlier decision to save the entire world state becoming oddly prescient. It's odd that other homebrew configurations of *Mercenary* haven't emerged, given that creating them would not be that difficult, but perhaps, just perhaps, players had too much respect for the integrity and beauty of the originals to clumsily rearrange them.

Mercenary and its expansion would go on to have a long shelf life. The mathematical nature of the 3D world was platform independent, so once a new engine was written for another machine the game and expansion pack could be ported straight over. Sometimes not even that was needed. "The first thing Paul did as a programmer when he approached the Amiga was to write an Atari simulator. Nothing was ever written for the Amiga. Not that we ever told anyone. They were very partisan." Indeed.

For an intensely personal game, *Mercenary* tapped into a broad universal appeal. That we still hail features packed into a game over 20 years ago as innovative is a testament to the strength of the original vision.



Take a ship, fly it somewhere, park it up, and the game would always remember where you left it (top). Interiors, like the rest of the game, were spartan (centre). Woakes' sense of mischief was everywhere: destroy one of these (above) in a Commodore version of the game and you'd be rewarded, but doing the same while running it on an Atari platform would be asking for trouble

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: Deep Red Games Limited

DATE FOUNDED: 1998

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 50

HEAD OF STUDIO: Chris Dillon (below right)



URL: www.deepred.co.uk

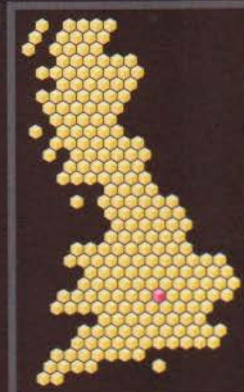
SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY:
Risk, Seaworld, Seaworld 3D, Vegas, Monopoly Tycoon, Beach Life

KEY STAFF:
Chris Dillon (studio director), George Jeganathan (group technology director), Paul Howarth (development director)





Heart Of Empire: Rome **(top) and** ***Tycoon City: New York*** **(above) emphasise Deep Red's experience in strategic and social-simulation entertainment**



LOCATION:
Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

CURRENT PROJECTS:
Heart Of Empire: Rome (Koch Media), *Tycoon City: New York* (Atari)

PHILOSOPHY AND TECHNOLOGY:

"At Deep Red we believe you must specialise if you are to become the best at what you do. For the last seven years the company has quietly concentrated on becoming one of the world's most sought-after developers of strategy and social-simulation software.

"Our mission is simple: build a singleminded company based around high-quality people, technology and design. The tremendous success of our titles thus far is proof of this – even our very early titles continue to sell today.

"This philosophy of specialisation spreads also to our technology. Everyone is writing engines, but very few are focusing the features and capabilities of their engines in the same way as Deep Red, which is why studio director Chris Dillon believes the company's 'actualityengine' technology is right up there with the best.

"The various technologies that make up 'actualityengine' have been in development for over three years at our Buckinghamshire studio. The proprietary cross-product, cross-platform game engine and tool-chain was designed from the outset to deliver the features required in world-building and social-simulation games; this has meant we have been able to achieve significant, higher levels of performance.

"The scale and complexity of the worlds we are creating are vast; 'actualityengine' has been designed to deliver worlds of 100,000 living and breathing characters. We wanted to create worlds that the player believed in; we saw support for dynamic lighting and dynamic hard-edged shadows as key. Objects in our worlds change colour and project striking shadows as the sun rises and sets.

"Supporting the engine is a powerful proprietary tool-chain consisting of a model editor for applying advanced material effects to objects, and a suite of material batching and optimisation tools to deliver performance.

"The model editor allows our artists to assign graphical properties and effects to an object, such as generating various levels of detail to ensure the player is presented with the highest image quality possible.

"Our animation pipeline provides a wealth of features including the use of motion-capture data, and characters can be assigned various detail levels: characters close to the camera are fully skinned switching to segmented versions when in the distance. Another unique piece of technology is the ability to dynamically recolour the clothes of a character and mix head styles to create thousands of individual characters within the same scene."

Codeshop

Tracking developments in development

With a little help from Sony

Behind the scenes, Sony's developer relations and technology groups have been preparing the ground for the opening salvo of PlayStation 3 games



Paul Holman, VP, technology group, Sony Computer Entertainment

While the attention of the gaming world remains on the physicality of the PlayStation 3 console, for the members of Sony's technology and development relations groups the focus is much more on the process. The group has been working over the past months making sure developers have everything they need to hit the ground running.

"I think when people first saw the specification for PlayStation 3 they thought it would be impossible to program, but it's probably easier than PlayStation 2 simply because we've teamed up with companies such as Nvidia, and so have access to their graphics tools and shader utilities," explains developer support manager **George Bain**. "As we've been travelling around visiting the early PlayStation 3 developers, they are loving the fact we teamed up with Nvidia to make it a lot easier on the graphics side."

> **"Developers love the fact we teamed up with Nvidia to make it easier on the graphics side"**

It's this sort of collaborative approach that is one of the big changes for Sony. Previously, it's been somewhat measured in terms of the flexibility of the tools provided for PlayStation development. One notable example has been its reluctance to provide Windows-based development kits – technology that has had to be supplied by thirdparty middleware companies such as SN Systems and Metrowerks. But with the PlayStation 3 team consisting of Sony, IBM and Nvidia, tools, and even Windows-based ones, are now a high priority.



George Bain, developer support manager, Sony Computer Entertainment Europe

"This is our fourth console iteration," points out **Paul Holman**, vice president of the technology group at Sony Computer Entertainment Europe. "We learned along the way to try to get developers what they want. Of course, they want everything but we try to give them a number of different alternatives. This time round, there will be an emphasis on a Windows-based product early on. For example, we'll provide a default integrated development environment called Eclipse, which was originally developed by IBM and has since been open-sourced."

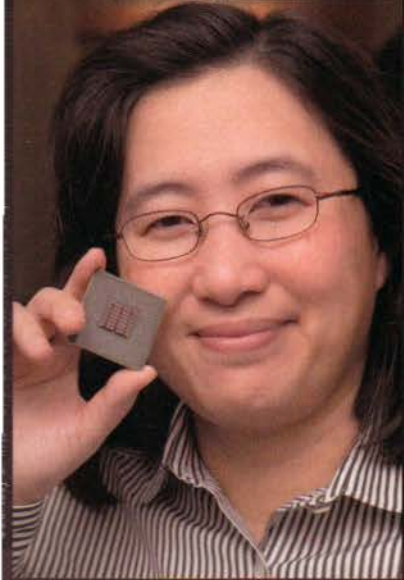
This attitude may even have an impact on some areas of the middleware market, which grew rapidly as developers struggled to get to grips with PlayStation 2. Now it spans a huge range of exotic solutions from compilers and debuggers to speech recognition and menu creation tools.

"I suppose there could be tension between what Sony is providing and what is available elsewhere," muses Holman. "We like to think we would provide the minimum standard of middleware so developers don't have to go and purchase extra tools from day one. But in some areas, such as physics, I think those middleware companies will continue to do fine. Equally, developers usually have a certain way of working and they will prefer to retain that over the ability to use new tools."

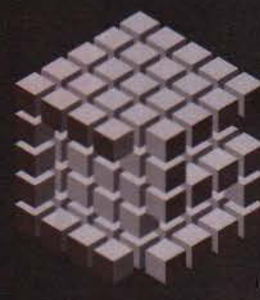
Another example of Sony's openness is the Collada project. Similar to Microsoft's XNA framework, it provides an opportunity for developers, middleware companies and other tool providers to allow digital assets to be shared between all their many different applications.

Launched through Sony's research and development office in the US, Holman is keen to point out it shouldn't be referred to as a Sony project.

"We kicked off the initiative, but it's not Sony's Collada," he argues. "With PlayStation 3 we want to make life easy for developers, and as part of that we've taken a more pragmatic approach. We realise many developers are multi-platform based and use different tools in their art pipelines. For example, we have open-sourced an API so they can









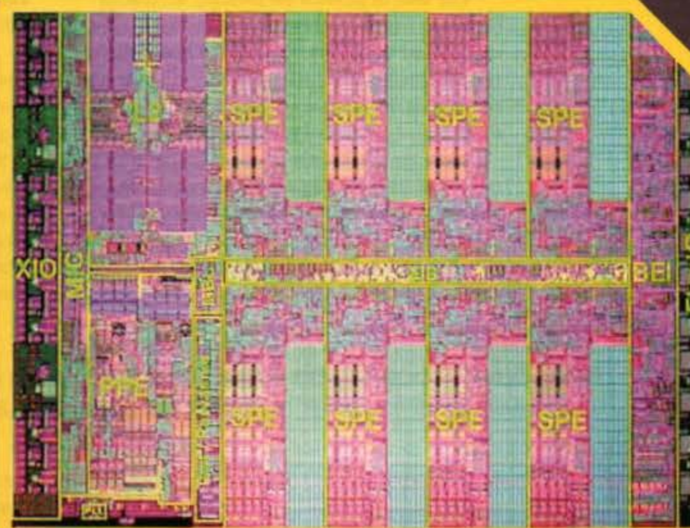
With Cells starting to roll off the IBM production line, Big Blue has released the first images of a Cell fabricated within its mounting module (top). Meanwhile, Sony's duck demo shows how easy it is to make use of the power of Nvidia's RSX

immediately get up to speed and write their own tools. So the best way to think about Collada is as an interchange format whereby you can unify different teams using different software and art packages so they can share and manipulate assets such as game characters and objects no matter what software they are using. It's not completely altruistic of course because with PlayStation 2, PSP and PlayStation 3 we have our own multiplatform play these days."

But perhaps one of the most surprising next-gen changes Sony's developer support teams have dealt with is much more prosaic: there are just fewer developers to support. As many pointed out back in 1999, the move to PlayStation 2 has proved to be a destructive force for developers. Not directly, of course, but one impact of a leap in processing power is always the knock-on effect on business models. The clarion calls that only 50-man development teams would be able to handle PlayStation 2 development may not have been strictly true, but there aren't many healthy development studios with less than 50 staff these days.

"The change from PlayStation to PlayStation 2 and now PlayStation 3 is quite staggering," Holman says. "We were plotting on a Europe-wide map the locations of developers and there were so many more PlayStation developers out. There's been so much consolidation. Most of the old names have just vanished."

So, with another revolution on the way, expect more of the same. Sony's consoles may be getting easier to make games for, but that doesn't always make developers' lives easier. And sadly that's one area where not even Holman, Bain and their teams can help.



How eight became seven

One of the most intriguing snippets of PlayStation 3 news has been the downgrading of its Cell CPU. Originally announced as consisting of a core with eight so-called synergetic processing elements (SPEs), the most recent Sony documentation lists only seven SPEs with the eighth labelled as 'redundant'.

According to some recent pronouncements from father of the PlayStation Ken Kutaragi, the reasoning behind this is straightforward: it's simply an elegant approach to the issue of chip yields that any company dealing with state-of-the-art manufacturing has to overcome.

In the early stage of manufacturing silicon chips, yields tend to be very low as the initial problems are overcome. So, instead of throwing away lots of Cell processors that were only marginally lacking in functionality, the decision to drop down to seven SPEs for all PlayStation 3 Cells means Sony can produce more working chips during the console's critical launch phase, as well as keeping costs as low as possible.

No one has yet commented on how this impacts the processing power available in PlayStation 3, but analysts think the overall fluidity of how Cells and the SPEs work means that in practice the reduction of grunt will be much less than the 12.5 percent mathematically predicted. This is a measure of how the SPEs work as general-purpose processors, compared to, say, PS2's Vector Units, which had to be coded in a certain way. With the SPEs, the various processes can be handled with much more fluidity rather than as discrete processor lumps that may or may not be available.

As for the question of whether later-manufactured PlayStation 3s will boast extra performance because of their additional working SPE once the initial problems are overcome, the philosophy of console design means it just won't happen. Developers can't be asked to utilise something they can't be sure will be present so throughout PlayStation 3 lifespan, so only seven SPEs will be used, even if all eight are working.



BY GARY PENN

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Playing with reality

The computer is so precise, so clinical, so sterile and so soulless – not surprising given its binary nature. Its masters perpetuate this perfection, aiming as they do to create reliable route-finding, infallible 'artificial intelligence', precise recreations of known natural rules... so little is deliberately flawed, organic and fundamentally satisfying as a result.

The laws of physics are lovingly, accurately recreated and the results tend to be technically real but not exaggerated enough to feel really real. So much seems to be so soft – so little has convincing mass because there's such a reliance on a tangled simulated web of reality.

Magicians and Hollywood understand how to exploit the need for a well-crafted illusion not a precision simulation. The audience only experiences and is impressed by a simple, effective end result not the expertise or accuracy of the internal workings. Where Hollywood cheats, our industry typically tries to do it properly, ignoring the dramatic simplification offered by toys in favour of the overwhelming complexity of 'the real thing'.

So-called 'artificial intelligence' effectively provides a collection of generic natural rules to conveniently make toy performance consistent in a complex simulation. But since when was clever entertaining? It might be efficient and challenging, but dumb is usually more fun.

To be precise, it's not even a matter of intelligence. It's about convincing, entertaining, satisfying performances being preferable to flawless automatons. You don't have to be smart to be a performer, to follow the rules, but you do have to have a flair for dramatic effect.

These are artificial players, performers in roles – entertainers first and foremost. These performers are playing for the player's benefit, not an unseen audience or the author. The performers are in on the joke. Their motivation isn't necessarily to catch you but to give you the chase of your life, almost catching you. The hunt is better than the kill but almost being killed and getting away with it is most exhilarating (*Pac-Man* is still a strong example).

Historically, play is made challenging by a need for precision. Oh, the 'joy' of playing Guess The Word in text adventures or Hunt The Pixel in graphic adventures. The pixel-perfect jumps at the heart of ye olde 'platformers' such as *Manic Miner* are less common today – the range of activities to perform is greater than just jumping holes or hazards. Jumping in *Zelda* is automated for more convenient navigation in three dimensions. Deciding when to jump and for how long is removed from the player, which is acceptable because the focus of play isn't jumping. Compare that with jumping in *Half-Life*, from the point of view of your toy (a 'firstperson perspective'), which often only adds exasperation to the mix. Fortunately, virtual play is becoming less precise – less about performing this exact action at this exact point at this exact moment with these exact conditions fulfilled. There's a distinctive resurgence of plain old-fashioned play but with contemporary toys ('freeform emergent sandbox gameplay' as it's more commonly known).

> "These days it's common for actions and even activities to be context sensitive, to automate and reduce precision and skill requirements"

As we move towards the notion of toys and play, compendiums of games, the focus shifts away from precision – from, say, vehicles that accurately mimic their real-world counterparts (as if that's appropriate for a digital control pad or an analogue stick instead of a steering wheel) to those that feel like vehicles in the best Hollywood car chases.

These days it's more common for actions and even activities to be context sensitive, to automate and reduce precision and skill requirements for the more mundane areas. As a former hardcore player, the first time I encountered Lara's automated targeting or Link's automated jumping I found it patronising. But then it depends on why you play. How you play has been subject to simplification over the years. There was a time when it felt like every action had its own interface trigger. *System Shock* (and many years earlier *Aztec*) seemed to use every key on keyboard.

At least console controllers have fewer buttons to force simplification, although sometimes it's oversimplification akin to a lobotomy, like in *Dragon's Lair* (that's certainly how *Resident Evil 4* feels sometimes with its 'Quick Time Events', reminiscent of *Shenmue* at its most insipid). *Devil May Cry* is more effective at creating the illusion of performing insane actions with aplomb – you have just enough control to be convinced that you are in control and making a difference. You push the action figure into acting, performing dramatic actions. You don't make precise decisions.

In *GTA*, you don't have to stand within arm's length of a vehicle door, press a button to open it then push the action figure into the vehicle to enter it then press a button again to close the door before pressing another button to start the engine then... (believe it or not, that was actually the case at one point with the original.) That's precision. That's tedium. That's life, not play.

Gary Penn began his career on Zzap!64, before working at BMG and DMA Design. He now makes games at Denki

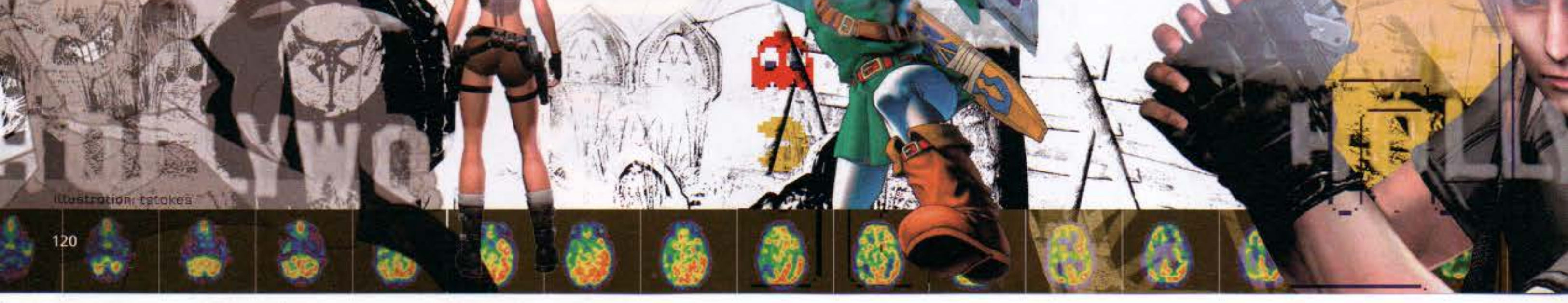
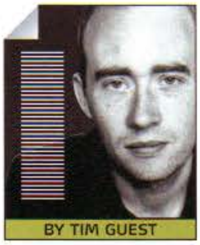


illustration: tatokes



BY TIM GUEST

THE GUEST COLUMN

Original sins

Sex in videogames is a sticky business, as the recent investigation into the hackable sex scenes in *GTA: San Andreas*, and the subsequent moral furore (including a personal crusade against Rockstar from Hilary Clinton), demonstrates. Somehow, in our virtual worlds, beating a Compton gangsta to death with a pair of brass knuckles is acceptable, but giving your girlfriend a light spanking warrants a Federal investigation. It's yet another way in which our journey through the electronic looking glass reverses the usual order of things.

Perhaps what makes us so uncomfortable about sex in videogames is that, as Freud pointed out, our urge for sex is stronger than our urge for violence. Put your average man on the street with a baseball bat, and he won't start swinging it at passers-by. Put the same man in a bedroom with a naked girlfriend, and... well, Ladbroke's wouldn't take a bet on what happens.

> My advice to virtual sinners is to enjoy it while you can. After all, virtual doesn't have to mean virtuous

We live in a sexualised culture, where we drive ourselves wild with desire and call it advertising – but our fear of the sex urge incites us to look at sex publicly only sideways, through reality TV shows and moisturiser ads. Within virtual worlds, where the moral police have yet to catch up with us, our virtual pioneers are letting it all hang out. There, many people have online sexual relationships with people they've never met, and every second resident has a naked avatar or a BDSM animation in their virtual back pocket. Many virtual worlds are on the verge of a new liberated summer of love.

But, of course, there's a dark side to virtual sexuality too. Peter Ludlow, a professor of philosophy and linguistics at the University of Michigan, uses virtual worlds as philosophical laboratories, where he can interact and explore with a new kind of reality, halfway between the real and the imaginary. He began in the seedier side of *The Sims Online*. Among the scammers, the duelling mafia syndicates—and a whole neighbourhood devoted to S&M – Ludlow met **Evangeline**, a virtual madam with a stable of virtual prostitutes, exchanging cybersex for Simoleans (the *Sims* currency.)

She claimed to have set up the first *Sims* brothel in October 2002, and that she earned up to $50 per trick. "My girls worked hard," Evangeline told Ludlow. "I only hired real cybersex girls who talked dirty."

After publishing the interview, Ludlow put in some detective work and published the cyber-madam's true name on his website. 'Evangeline', it turned out, was a 17-year-old boy from Florida. He was underage – his work as a virtual prostitute was arguably a major felony. Real-world law has yet to catch up with our virtual frontiers, however, and no prosecutions were brought. Still, his mother did reportedly cancel his *Sims* account.

Perhaps for that reason, 'Evangeline' proved impossible to locate. So – purely in the spirit of academic curiosity, of course – I decided to rent myself a different virtual escort. I chose *Second Life*, because that virtual world is only accessible by adults, so there's no risk there would be a minor at the other end. Nonetheless, I still felt awkward about my first encounter with paid sex (not least because my girlfriend was asleep upstairs). So I roped in a real-world friend to keep me company.

I sent an instant message to the 'madam', and received a reply shortly: there were two escorts online. The price was 1,000 Linden Dollars (about £3) for an hour. I chose an escort and within a minute I received a teleport invite. I accepted, and rematerialised in a 'VIP' room, decked out with tiger-print wallpaper. Various odd items were dotted around: a ball, a bench, wall-shackles. And there was my virtual lady of the night. I made my avatar gulp nervously. She laughed. Then she took off all her clothes.

In *The Sims Online*, there are no sexual animations; Evangeline's girls offered simply dirty-talk in a hot-tub. In *Second Life*, though, I soon discovered, there is much more on display Some of *Second Life*'s most profitable businesses revolve around avatar customisation dances, hugs, costumes, and avatars in various stages of undress. The default *Second Life* avatars have no genitalia, but my companion had clearly invested in an avatar skin – a long-haired, buxom, beautiful blonde – with all the detail filled in. She invited me to kiss her (whicl meant, basically, walking up close and her typing 'mmm' and '*kiss*'). Then she lay down on the floor and opened her legs.

It seems that the oldest profession has followed us into our newest worlds. Back in 1678, the actress Nell Gwyne found herself outside a theatre, sheltering from the rain, next to a prostitute who'd sought the same refuge. A taxi went past with a couple messily necking in the back. Gwyne turned to the prostitute: "Another profession ruined by amateurs," she said. Virtual prostitution has reached our virtual shores; virtual actresses can't be far behind. My advice to virtual sinners is to enjoy it while you can. After all, virtual doesn't have to mean virtuous. And Mary Whitehouse, or Hilary Clinton, will be along soon enough.

Tim Guest is an author and veteran videogame/technology journalist. His book, My Life In Orange, is published by Grant





BY MR BIFFO

BIFFOVISION

Secrets and lies

We all have secrets. Perhaps you once murdered a man, and ate his corpse. Maybe you're a biological mutant, and have a concealed extra nipple which secretes mud instead of milk, or you own the entire series of Stargate SG-1 on DVD. Whatever the case, we all have things that simply cannot be shared in polite company.

I have a particular secret, which I have – until now – kept concealed from my games-playing friends. And that secret is this: I think *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* is bollocks. Not 'the bollocks' – just 'bollocks'. As in 'a load of scrotums'. So awful is this secret that I've even lied to people, and pretended I think it's great, rather than endure the inevitable astonished queries.

I know admitting this is a bit like standing up in church, and saying you think Jesus would've looked better without the beard. But I can no longer hold it in. I have concluded that if just one of us speaks up, and admits what none dare to say, more will follow.

> So awful is this secret that I've even lied to people, and pretended I think it's great, rather than endure the inevitable astonished queries

It's not like I haven't tried to enjoy it. I mean, I stuck with the PS2 version for almost a month of howling rage before I finally gave up in frustration. Even then I remained convinced that I'd somehow got it wrong – that I couldn't see whatever it was that everyone else could. Why did I not like this game, which received perfect scores and was being bought by everyone in the world? Was I, in some way, mentally ill?

I got so caught up in the hype that I even bought the recent PC version, and tried again with that. I noted that it was marginally easier to shoot people, but once again, I came away cursing its very name. Even then I had to burn my hand with a cigarette to stop myself going and buying the Xbox version.

Historically, I kind of almost liked *GTA III*, and *Vice City*. More than *San Andreas*, anyway. I've always found the controls to be sluggish and top-heavy, and the combat controls close to unusable, and I never could be quite bothered to finish them. But at least they let you play in the sandbox without having to worry you were too fat, or too unhealthy, or too unfashionable. I have enough of that when I'm away from a console – I don't need to be reminded of it when I'm looking for some escapist entertainment.

I don't want to be worrying about the negative consequences of my actions. If I eat for energy, I don't then want to have to find a gym, and spend ten minutes pumping buttons to keep the pork belly at bay. That isn't a game. It's needless busy work, like a burned-out teacher getting his pupils to colour in a picture of 'Iron Mad' Wilkinson while he gets drunk and remorseful in the stationary cupboard.

If the series continues to progress in this direction, how much longer before you're having to forego missions in order to earn enough money to pay the mortgage, or fending off telesales calls, or having to visit a pharmacy to buy powder for your athlete's foot?

Even when you're not worrying about going to the dentist, or driving for 20 minutes to visit your mother because it's her birthday, or going to the horse races to win enough money to pay for her hysterectomy, it's still a grind. The controls do not make for a slick playing experience. I seem to be constantly fighting against them, and the camera. Why is nobody mentioning this? Why do people enjoy it? How can anyone play a game that's such a chore?

I want to play the game everybody else claims they're playing. I want to play it so badly it literally makes my feet bleed, but I've recentl come to the conclusion that maybe the game doesn't exist after all.

I don't necessarily blame reviewers. I can empathise with their plight; on paper, *San Andreas* really is the best game ever. A huge, living state to explore, larger than anything eve seen in a game? Total flexibility to customise your character? Billions upon trillions of secret bits? It should be amazing, and any flaws shoul pale next to such impressive statistics, but it's simply too unfocused.

There are too many ideas jostling for attention, and I'm intimidated by it. I feel like I should be burgling houses, but it's such a pain to do so that I can rarely be bothered. I know I need to go to the gym, but it's a 20-minute wal to get there. I could drive, but my car just blew up, and it's the middle of the night, and there aren't any other cars around to steal, and – oh, sod it – what's on telly?

It frustrates me that I don't enjoy *GTA: San Andreas*, but maybe I'm in the right, and you're all wrong. What if it is a case of the Emperor's New Game? What if you're all buying into a common conceit that the *GTA* games are brilliant, when in actual fact they're deeply flawed? That's what I'm going to tell myself from now on. That's how I'm going to learn to sleep at night.

Until *Grand Theft Auto: Liberty City Stories* comes out on the PSP, anyway. Bollocks indeed

Mr Biffo co-founded Digitiser, Channel 4's Teletext-based videogames section, and now writes mainly for television



Inbox



Issue 152

I wanted to write a quick response to Callum Hibbert as he seems to be a bit confused. I would say there is a big difference between watching a film and participating in an violent video game. In a game it is you in control and you are performing these acts of violence rather than being a viewer detached from the actual deeds being viewed. This, in my book, is a fundamental difference and allows us to enjoy a violent film as we are removed from the acts themselves.

I would also mention that I do not have children, but I can certainly comment on the influences which any that I do have could be subjected to.

David Fowkes

Last month's Inbox section was full of rants about how 'boring' and 'ridiculous' it is of Sony and Microsoft to be bandying around stats on their next-gen machines, and the question of 'why bother?' was raised on more than one occasion.

Why bother? Because it works – because the gaming majority will form their decision to buy one machine over another based largely on these specs, and subsequently dismiss the other as being 'inferior'. Every next-gen war I can remember (since Sega's Mega Drive versus Nintendo's Super NES) has been pretty much wn or lost in the exact same fashion. Kids and adults alike want the latest and greatest, the 'cutting edge', the coup de grace.

We can't scream foul play and blame Sony or Microsoft for cashing in on our collective ignorance. Like any other business they exist to make money, not provide us with life-changing experiences, and, just as specs sell cars, washing machines and TVs, they sell videogame consoles. If we want to get angry with someone, let's get angry with ourselves. The only way we can demand life-changing gaming experiences, new ideas, and fresh concepts is with our hard-earned cash.

But instead 'we' as collective gamers will still respond to their specification spindoctoring in the only way that ultimately matters. 'We' will still go out and reward manufacturers based on their ability to create superior hardware, rather than hanging back until we see which one is committed to instead creating, and/or driving others to create, truly innovative videogaming experiences.

Similarly, we'll still then buy our first batch of games for it. The latest *San Andreas* clone, *Sport Franchise X 2006*, *Movie Licence Monster*, and (WWII-based) *Generic FPS*. Then next week we'll cry about how they never make interesting or original games any more.

Sorry, but it's time to look in the mirror, people – vote with your wallet and buy your next-gen console and games based upon innovation, creativity, and *fun*, rather than teraflops, polys and the need to keep up with the Joneses. Go on – I dare you!

LJH

We can't scream foul play. Like any other business, Sony and Microsoft exist to make money, not provide us with life-changing experiences

Interestingly, though, the marketing departments of videogame console manufacturers would surely claim that their hardware exists to offer life-changing experiences – see Microsoft's dream of Xbox 360 transforming the entire digital entertainment needs of millions of users. Let's be honest: you can't really compare buying a washing machine to buying a new console.

This is in response to the issue brought up by David Fowkes (E151). First of all I'd like to congratulate David on having the rationality to point out the social implications of the next generation's level of realism at a time when everybody else is salivating at the prospect of driving a machinegun-mounted sports car through a zombie-infested, photorealistic depiction of Trafalgar square. I do respect David's concern for his (and presumably everyone else's) kids and agree that exposing them to ultrarealistic depictions of violence is probably not the best of ideas; however, I have to disagree with the idea that violence should be made to look unrealistic for the sake of 'the already impressionable youth', unless of course the game happens to be aimed specifically at youngsters. If a film is made which contains realistic depictions of violenc rape or mass murder it isn't frowned upon, it is simply accepted that this is suitable for a certain age group and classified accordingly. This is because films are not inherently 'for' kids, teenagers or adults – they are judged i this sense on their individual merit. There is an important issue at the hear of this, and I believe it is that videogames are still presumed to be fo children. I started playing videogames when I was about ten and was as happy as Larry with the little blue hedgehog that ran and bounced before me, but as I have got older my tastes have change although my desire to play has not. I think if all games were certified in the same way as films and not just the 'grown-up' ones, this would communicate to the public that it is a universal industry and that retailers, parents and individuals must take the responsibility for what content one wi be exposed to in a game, and not put it all on the developers who are trying to entertain a diverse audience.

Antony Kane

Clearly this is a complex issue, and on that's actually growing in complexity seemingly by the week. We've already looked at how the BBFC rates games (see E144), but the issue of a wider understanding of gaming by the world at large reaches far beyond a number inside a coloured circle on the back of box, as you suggest. Strap yourself in: this is just beginning...

Regarding the E3 article in **E**151: I was one of the 'young men... hired to cheer and whoop' at Microsoft's E3 Xbox 360 conference at the Shrine Auditorium and I have to say that although we were cast by our casting agency and paid to be there, we were not given any instructions at all. We were supposed to represent gamers of all forms, from casual to hardcore. Some of the people were genuinely disinterested while others, like me, were lapping it up like mana.

During the rehearsal, there was some clapping and hooting, because it genuinely seemed impressive to us. Unlike you jaded journos we had not seen the PS3 conference, nor closed-door showings or whatever; we were seeing it for the first time.

I was one of the 'young men hired to cheer at Microsoft's E3 conference', but although we were paid, we were given no instructions at all

During the event itself, the energy in the air was palpable. After all, when was the last time you were on stage in front of thousands of people? That, coupled with the genuine impressive ness of (most of) what was on display, made it very exciting for us on stage. We were not told when or how much to clap, it just happened.

Aside from all of that, as a hardcore gamer I felt that the MS showing was more impressive than Sony's because they actually showed what felt like realtime AND in-game, not some overly polished, prerendered, or realtime but clearly not in-game footage. Of course, that strategy worked for Sony against the Dreamcast as we were promised Jurassic Park in realtime and got something that was only marginally better than the DC.

To quote Yogi Berra, it is deja vu all over again. Until Sony actually shows something tangible, I will remain skeptical.

DDH

Or perhaps until Sony hands you a big pile of used notes stuffed into an envelope in exchange for you appearing onstage to applaud its new console, eh? (Sorry, but we couldn't resist.)



David Wallwork sees potential in his *Halo 2* escapades that would appeal outside of the traditional game environment, envisioning a future where gamers make their own movies

I've just read an Out There story on **Edge** Online (www.edge-online.co.uk/archives/2005/06/knowing_you_kno_1.php) and was wondering why Jeremy Bailenson and Nick Yee thought it necessary to study 70 students' reactions to avatars that mimic their own body movements? As CGI approaches photorealism, why do they find it surprising that we react subconsciously to virtual people in much the same way as we do to genuine humans? Which led me to think, as consoles and PCs become more and more powerful, is it possible that software could be developed which allows us to produce feature films in our own homes? With the right middleware, it wouldn't be impossible for a competent, wannabe director to produce a competent CGI film.

Instead of trying to compete with the film industry, the games industry could play it at its own game. I already look upon moments in computer games, ie arriving at the 'Hill' ('King of the Hill' in *Halo 2*) with one SMG, dispatching two opponents, picking up a second weapon AND having time to reload, with as much of a sublime feeling as I got from the last fight sequence in the film version of The Matrix. Wouldn't it be amazing to see the reactions on opponents' faces, linked to their real-life expressions, in realtime in a game like *Halo 2* with photorealistic graphics? Failing that, create those fantasy film sequences that have always been in the back of your mind in a game or piece of software that lets you produce them on the web to possible critical acclaim.

David Wallwork

Well, soon, of course, it won't be just your friends on the sofa who'll bear witness to your feats of gaming skill – at least that's according to Microsoft, which wants its Xbox 360 network to serve as a kind of window on to each of its users' playing spaces. The first games spectators will be driven to watch via this system will be competitive sports or FPS titles, but who knows? Perhaps one day gamers will use their networked consoles to remotely watch how a masterful criminal performs the perfect bank job in a future edition of *Grand Theft Auto*.

Can someone please explain to me whatever happened to the development of VR technology and specifically VR headsets?

It seems to me that we are forever complaining about control methods and controlling camera angles in games, and yet here was a technology that could have provided us with the most immersive experience ever. But we seem to have just forgotten about it.

To me, no matter how great the graphics in a game are these days, the bottom line is that I am still sat in front of a TV screen holding a piece of plastic, waggling analogue sticks and trying to remember button sequences. How realistic is that? At the end of the day we are still using the same control method to play games that we used to play *Pong* on the Atari VCS over 20 years ago. OK, so the controllers now have more buttons – but is that really progress? I for one don't want to control the camera – I just want to play the game. But a VR headset? Surely we have the technology now to create a headset with a hi-resolution display that can read the movements of your head? Can you imagine what games would be like? FPS shooters and racing games would be incredible, for a start.

I'm just hoping that the Nintendo Revolution's much-touted mysterious control method is a headset. Yes, I know, the odds are slim – but it's either that or trying to strap my PSP to my head.

Steve Erickson

VR technology is, in fact, still being developed, albeit not on the scale it once was. The problem from a gaming perspective is that not enough people want to get so physically involved in order to make things happen onscreen. While joypads continue to perform control functions via the mere lifting of a finger, don't expect a VR revival in gaming to surface.

I have a few comments in response to Jody Barton's whinge in **E**152 which makes some great points but is undermined by statements such as: 'The only people who have the time needed to dedicate to online gaming are either teenagers or the unemployed, and neither demographic is known for being wealthy with high levels of disposable income!' The obvious error here is that teenagers are such a lucrative market due to their high levels of disposable income.

Jody does, however, go on to explain what might have made him so reluctant to indulge in online gaming: 'I actually know more people online with their PS2s'. I fear Jody's experiences playing Sony's online service were similar to mine. Jody seems to be missing the point somewhat: 'I'd rather humiliate my mates over some beers and some insults in the same room than the twerp in Texas'. Wouldn't we all? But my friends aren't in my living room in the 15-minute gap between getting up in the morning and heading off to university.

'Am I getting old?' In a word, yes.

James Glisson
(Level 33 Human Priest,
161 hours played)

And they say students are layabouts.

Before raising the idea of investigating this issue, I realise

Continued ›

that you mentioned in a previous issue the emerging aspects of 'alternate reality games' such as the BBC's *Jamie Kane*. I feel, however, that a more in-depth look at these games should be given by your writers in a forthcoming issue, especially with online games such as *Perplex City* (www.perplexcity.com) providing new and potentially revolutionary ways of looking at the ways in which we engage with games. Perhaps even a glance at websites such as the Alternate Reality Gaming Network (www.argn.com) would suggest that the emergence of these games is perhaps a move into the mainstream, and that these games provide a level of interactivity unseen in other conventional formats.
Martin Hollis

Please stop sending us this letter, Martin. We've already pledged to cover more alternative reality gaming.

There is a small box in the corner of Edge's reviews index page. 'Edge's scoring system explained', it calls itself. '1', it reveals, means 'one'. '2', meanwhile, does in fact mean 'two'. Eager to discover what '3' meant, I read on; turns out it means 'three'.

Apart from the obvious benefit of teaching imbeciles such as myself how to count, what is the proposed purpose of this feature?
James Duffy

If you have to ask what it means, you may need to start asking questions about all sorts of things relating to videogames. And it's probably best not to go there.

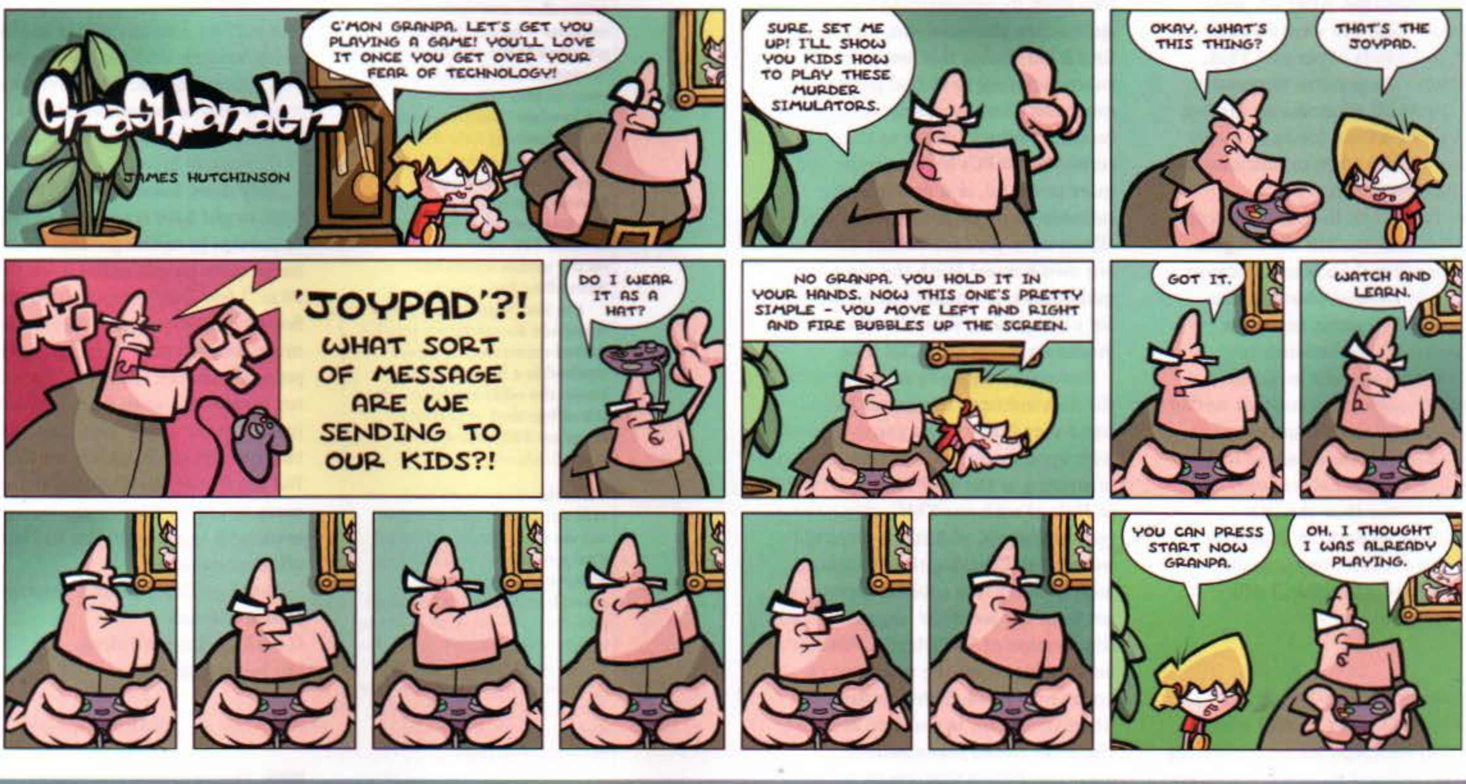
After reading Sean Fox's letter (**E152**) about the lies that hardware manufacturers peddle every time they want to sell us something, and in particular the 'Charlie' tech demo from the PS2 prerelease hype, I realised there is a fundamental misunderstanding of these displays of electronic wizardry.

The PS2 could render the 'Charlie' head in realtime but that's all it could render. No physics engine, no game engine, no city for him to live in, no car for him to drive, no one for him to talk to, not even a body to sit atop of. That's why a guy in *GTAIII* doesn't look as good as a guy in *MGS2*; *GTA* has its polygons spread thinly.

Tech demos are fundamentally misleading to the public. When you or I see Alfred Molina's head on PS3 we say, "Wow, that looks almost real." But when a games industry graphics programmer sees it he says, "Wow, subsurface diffusion, high dynamic range volumetric lighting, multiple overlaid texture mapping, bump mapping, parallax mapping, blipity blip, bit mapping, blip, road mapping, and all in a single pass! Blip." And then he thinks '80-hour weeks. Am I going to see my children grow up?' And that's who these demos are for. The poor guy who missed his daughter's birthday because of a Christmas deadline, not you and me. I doubt if even five per cent of PS2 owners have ever even heard of Charlie's 'spooky' head.

As for overhyping things, it's called marketing, and you're right, it sucks.
Ham

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on sale September 1





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